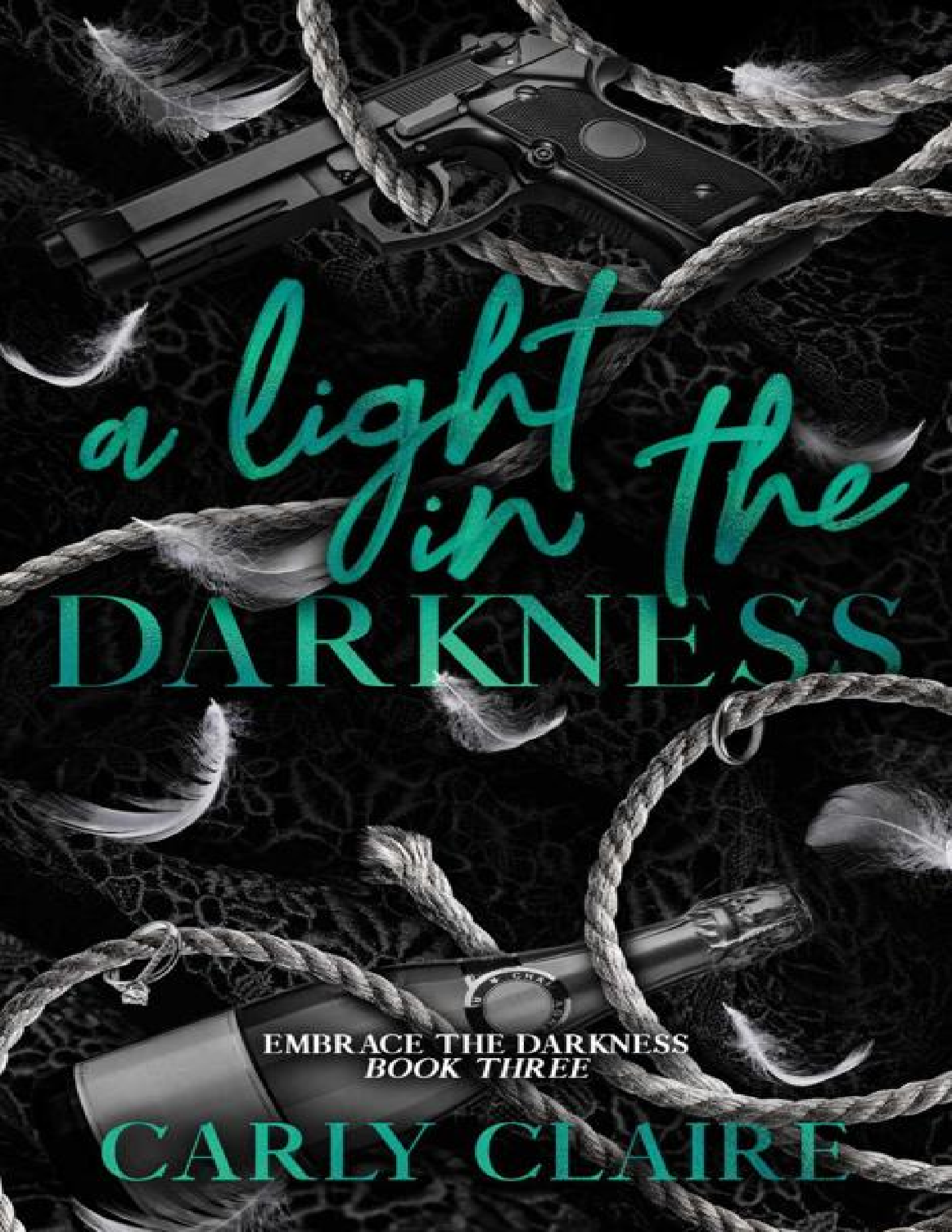
a light in the
DARKNESS
EMBRACE THE DARKNESS
BOOK THREE
CARLY CLAIRE

A Light in the Darkness

Carly Claire

OceanofPDF.com

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I've said before that this series was meant to take you into a darker place, and I did mean that. In this book, you will not find the most twisted and spicy fucked up shit you'll ever read. If you want sensationalism, this isn't the one, but this *is* the conclusion of a story of generational trauma and sexual abuse. To that end, potential things you should be aware of.

Descriptions of SA by multiple people, mentions of SA of an underage person, mentions of forced surgical hysterectomy, extensive discussion of pregnancy and forced surgical removal of the living baby, trafficking of humans for abuse and financial gain, children used as pawns and for financial profit. This book also contains mentions of depression and similar themes. If you aren't in the right headspace, there is absolutely zero shame in holding off on this one.

A comprehensive list of warnings, which may include potential spoilers, can be found HERE.

If you've received the print version of this book and would like to view the extensive triggers list, please visit linktree.com/authorcarlyclaire

These warnings should be taken seriously.

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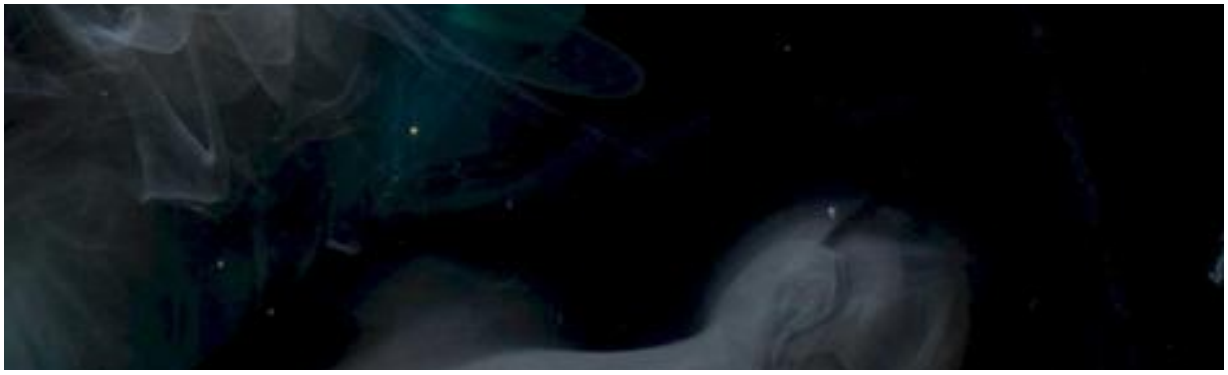

From the air, the sprawling estate and lush gardens looked exactly as they had the last time I was here. Now that I've got boots on the ground, I can see the subtle differences. Clearly, someone is still caring for this place. But perhaps not with the same level of detail as they would with more oversight.

The Carrara marble statue in the center of the garden looks somehow more severe, the mid-afternoon sun casting long shadows around us, making his smile seem sinister. Maybe it's a trick of the light, or maybe I just know the truth about who he is. Either way, as we draw past it, the anger in my veins grows. I'd shoot the fucking statue to splinters right now if I wasn't concerned about giving away our position.

"Fucking creepy," Michael growls over the comms. From the corner of my eye, I see him shudder, as if the statue is giving him a visceral reaction.

"You don't love the giant statue of a rapist?" Dimitri asks drily. He's on the opposite side of the property, approaching from the south, but he's studied the drone footage of this place more than I studied for my SAT's. And I actually *wanted* to go to college.

I'm fairly certain Dimitri could sketch this place with his eyes closed. Besides, I wouldn't be surprised if there were more statues around the back of the house featuring other monsters and predators, both mythical and physical. Alexandre Davos is a monster of the first order—he's built an empire on the backs of men and women stolen from their lives and thrust

into a world of horrors. My father forced me to be a foot soldier to the empire, but now I'm going to dismantle it.

"Nah, I don't vibe with people who have God complexes. It's why Remy and I have such a love/hate relationship."

Someone chuckles across the comms line, and I adjust my grip on the gun. For one moment, I consider letting my finger slip over the trigger. A graze in the back of the calf would stop that laughter real quick and remind them that this is serious business, not a fucking slumber party.

I waited to take on this mission until Michael was healed, but a small part of me misses when he couldn't talk. His jovial attitude is far too blasé given what we're about to do. But I suppose he's not used to all of this yet. He's still new to recognizing the horrors of the world, just now learning how wicked it really is. I suppose shitty attempts at humor could be his coping mechanism, and who am I to deny someone their coping mechanism?

My coping mechanism for years was meaningless sex. Nothing shuts your brain off quite like being buried in hot pussy. Nothing helps me sleep either. After a good fuck, I can tell myself that the screams I hear when I close my eyes at night are women in ecstasy, women who have come apart under my touch… women who gave themselves to me to be destroyed, knowing they could put themselves back together the morning after.

And then my little sister's best friend went and ruined years of progress, destroyed my coping mechanism, and left me a fucking mess. I let her go because a woman like Claire deserves a real shot at life—the whole nine yards, a picket fence, an engagement ring, and as many children as she can stand. I can give her none of that, which is why even though she soothes my storm and silences the screams, I sent her back to finish out her degree. The last few months without her have been a different sort of hell.

"Tighten up." Kent commands, from wherever he is approaching on the east.

"And *shut* up." Rich adds, his voice tight. Usually not the stony silence type, Rich turns into a different person when we're on a mission.

He's been an invaluable part of my crack team as we've chased down leads that don't pan out, make plans, and strategize. We've found a half dozen potential storehouses where Davos may be hiding, where he's keeping humans in captivity. It's been months of finding the right people, planning in silence, letting Davos think I've moved on.

I haven’t moved on from any of it—not what he did to me, to Genevieve, to Claire, my mother…

I’ve assembled a menagerie of fuckups to storm the castle, and I’m probably the most fucked up of them all. I’m also the only one who knows exactly what we’re about to walk into.

Kent said he’s seen shit that I can’t imagine, and I’m sure he’s right. He’s been in war-torn countries and put a man’s intestines back into the hole in his stomach, but has he seen women in steel cages with that dead look in their eyes despite their bodies being very much alive? Has he seen them paraded around naked like a trophy kill and auctioned to the highest bidder? Even if he’s seen all that, I doubt he’s seen a surgeon line women up on gurneys to take out their uteruses, one after another, so they can be used as living fuck toys.

Being back here after all these years feels like walking into my nightmares willingly. I’m covered with a sticky sheen of sweat despite the mild weather, and every nerve in my body feels ready to ignite. I’ve spent years preparing for this, and I’m ready.

But no one has said the thing we’re all thinking. There are no signs of life around the property anywhere—no one clipping the hedges, which are slightly overgrown, no one going for a walk in the garden, no one doing *anything*. I was here for a party the only time I had the misfortune of coming, and it had been crawling with people that night.

We waited intentionally for spring solstice, knowing there should be some sort of gathering to bring the masses together. They don’t need much of an excuse to party, but this should have been enough to at least warrant a small gathering. Every Solstice is when they introduce the untouched… virgins.

I’ve never attended one, so I can’t say where the parties may occur, but we’d come to decide upon this place. This is, after all, the place where they dragged me into this nightmare. And yet, as we draw closer, no sound comes from inside the building. No music, no chatter, no screams, and certainly not the laughter of a guest.

Michael hangs back in the cover of shadow as I step onto the porch and reach for the doorknob, testing it with the expectation that it will be locked. Instead, the lever presses all the way down, and I feel the pop of the seal release. I pause there just long enough to listen for footsteps on the other side, and then push open with the barrel of the gun aimed ahead of me.

I motion behind me for Michael to hang back while the door swings open, creaking on its hinges as I stay behind the cover of the other door. When the silence is uninterrupted, I follow the path that my gun carves, slipping quietly inside and sweeping the area for any signs of life.

The quiet is thick, like the dust that coats the chandelier in the center of the room. Specks of it float through the air, illuminated by the light that filters in from behind me. “Papa Bear,” Michael’s voice cuts into the silence, an incessant chirping in my ear.

I’ll fucking kill him before we find Davos if he keeps calling me that. Michael was keen on the idea of earpieces and happily chose code names for everyone before I told him that I absolutely would not respond to a code name. It’s not like Davos doesn’t know who I am, for fuck’s sake.

And apparently, he knew I was coming.

I’m not an expert in dust, given that I’ve always had housekeepers to clean before it could accumulate, but if I had to guess, I’d say no one has walked through this way in months, at least. But that doesn’t mean the house is entirely empty.

“Approaching the rear entrance.” Kent says, at the same time Michael repeats, “Papa Bear? Everything okay?”

“You won’t be if you call me that one more fucking time.” I hiss, turning around to push the door open. I glare at him from across the yard, driving my point home, and motion for him to join me.

Michael crosses the distance easily, keeping his head on a swivel, and once he’s safely at my side, I use my shoulder to pin him to the wall. He stares at me, confused, until I draw my finger across my own throat, miming how I’ll slit his if he keeps pressing me. I wouldn’t really, and Michael knows as much. I already watched my stupid ass half-brother attempt to do that. But the threat is a low blow, given how sensitive he is about the scar—a thin red line cutting right through his throat. He glowers at me, so I know the point has been taken, and I let him go.

I prefer to work alone because it’s easier that way. No dealing with people’s emotions, their loud voice in your ear, their fuckups. I isolated myself for years, dealing with the bare minimum to appease my father and Davos, while also still doing my best to get a shot at redemption. Unfortunately, after my father’s wake, I realized I can’t continue to run alone. I’m in deeper than I ever have been, and there are times where I simply need more men. I didn’t have enough people who understood what

was at risk during my father's wake, so I'd hired out. That proved to be a mistake—one that had me questioning just how much I could trust Michael.

But I learn from my mistakes. It's why I've gathered a group of people that I can trust—people with a vested interest in stopping Davos.

Kent Bowland's wife went missing during his first tour of duty. When the letters stopped coming, he thought she was pulling away from him, maybe having an affair. He assumed she was ducking his calls when he got access to the phone. By the time he got away to check on her, she was gone, their cat was dead, and the house was exactly how he'd left it. But every digital record of her existence was gone—their marriage certificate, social media pages, birth certificate, even her social security number. I can't imagine the mindfuck that must have been. It's been years, but he still hasn't given up hope of finding her… or finding out what happened to her.

Rich is a friend of Kent's, a grizzly bear looking man with a surprisingly soft personality. I don't know anything about him other than that. But Kent trusts him with his life, so I trust his reasons for being here are altruistic.

Harley Cross is the scariest woman I've ever seen despite being beautiful and an absolute badass. She hasn't told me her story yet, which is fine since I learned the hard way that bullying people into revealing their trauma doesn't work out so well. I do know that the rumors say she was attacked, and her baby was cut out of her stomach. They left her for dead, but Harley sewed herself up and went to find her kid. I don't even know if that's possible, but if anyone can do it, I guarantee it's her. She brought Dom into the fold after his younger brother was found in a dumpster without any of his vital organs.

And then there's Rook. A bouncer at one of my clubs, he has a vested interest in women's safety… particularly following a night out. It's why I've always felt partial to him. He was the first person to get through to Genevieve all those years ago, the first person to get her to open up and show who she really was. And as much as I hated to admit it, she was kind of spectacular. They say you never forget your first, and they're right. She still torments me, though in different ways than Claire.

Funny how both the living and dead can haunt you.

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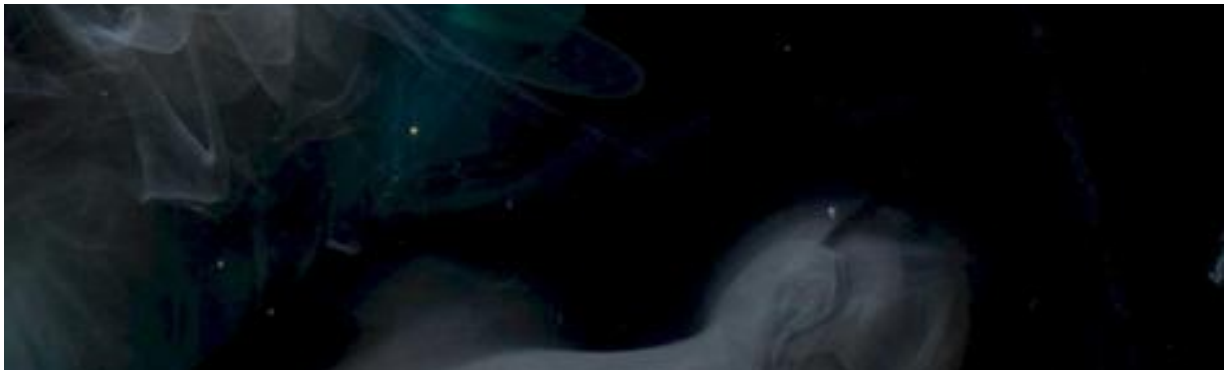

I'm a killer.

Some days, that thought circles through my mind on an endless loop… when I'm lying in bed at night, or staring aimlessly into the fridge, when my professors' lackluster ramblings cause my mind to wander. Even when the most beautiful man on campus asks me on a date.

Moose catches my eye from across the room, always watching, and I blink, realizing that Austin has stopped talking. For a minute, I forgot where I was. Some days, I'm still lying in the dark waiting for the monsters to come. Other days, I *am* the monster.

And some days, I actually pay attention in class as if my degree means a damn thing to the world. It's a piece of paper, which I know can be erased as easily as the text message I keep typing but have never sent. And yet, some days, I pull myself together enough to play the part of a collegiate looking to make plans for the future as if humanity isn't bleeding.

"I'm sorry," I shake my head as if that will pull me out of the funk, "what?"

Austin laughs, rubbing the back of his neck and causing his shirt to lift up to reveal a little of his six-pack. "I mean if you're interested, we can go together. I wasn't sure if you were with… *him*." Austin turns, tipping his head toward the musclehead staring daggers at us.

And just like that, I'm pulled completely back to reality. And what a weird fucking reality it is.

I laugh. “Moose?” Just saying his name makes me laugh again. As if I would be dating a man called Moose, for fuck’s sake. “No. He’s Just...” I hesitate because, really, what am I supposed to say? I consider him to be my stalker, but I can't very well go around telling that to other people who’ll be alarmed by those words. The acceptable response would be ‘friend’, but I’m not sure anyone can ever use the word *friend* in the same sentence as Moose.

“It's complicated.” I wave a hand to try and dismiss any further conversation about my unfortunately, sexy shadow. “But we are *not* together.”

“Okay.” Austin’s eyes dart from the menace in question back to me, sounding just a little less hesitant than before. “So, what do you say? I'll pick you up at four. We can tailgate a couple of hours before the game starts.”

Oh. *That's* what we were talking about. The basketball game.

Truth be told, I don’t understand sports. There are too many random rules and all of the yelling that people do definitely doesn't help matters. But the last few months have driven me insane, and now the idea of being anywhere other than my apartment sounds like heaven. Nearly a month of winter break with Moose on my ass made me so stir-crazy that I thought getting back to class would help. It didn’t help, of course, because every day the weather warms, I’m just reminded of last summer. Sometimes it feels like a fever dream, and while I know I can’t go back to what I had then, I don’t know if I’ll ever find anything—or anyone—that makes me feel so alive again.

Austin clears his throat a little, drawing my attention back to his brilliant blue eyes as he patiently waits for an answer.

I’m not sure I’ll be able to shake Moose long enough to get away, but I’m certainly willing to try. If nothing else, at least dragging him along to a social event will be a great form of torture. The thought of him sitting all sullen and dark like a little rain cloud while frat boys drink and sorority girls vie for his attention amuses me enough to laugh again. “Yeah.” I say finally, watching Austin’s grin widen further to reveal perfect white teeth.

Everything about Austin Lennon is perfect. I had a crush on him my sophomore year when we took humanities together, and he had never even seemed to notice me. But he notices me now, and even though I’m not hung up on him like I once was, it feels good to be noticed. “All right. I know

where the apartment is, but do you wanna give me your number just in case?”

I appraise his face, looking for any underlying threat. “How do you know where I live?”

“Rhea's birthday party last year.” He shrugs, looking slightly put off by the suspicion in my tone. “Remember? I did karaoke.”

“Oh.” I laugh as the heat washes across my skin.

I probably sound like a paranoid psychopath, but he either doesn't notice or doesn't really care. I’m sure he’s not looking to marry me, and after last summer, I’m fairly certain that psychopaths are fun in bed. I’m not sure I’d consider Remy a psychopath, but I think *I* may be, and I had a damn good time in the sheets with him.

I feel the lust curl in my stomach at the memories of all the filthy things we did, but I stave them off quickly. “I remember that, actually. Your rendition of Journey was moving. You actually had me convinced you *were* just a small-town girl.”

I bite my lip, wishing I could take the stupid joke back as soon as it’s said, but Austin laughs. “Well, you know what they say… don't stop believing.” He shifts and grabs his phone out of his back pocket.

“Oh, right. My number.”

I recite the numbers while Moose glares at me with his arms crossed over his black tee, and Austin punches the numbers in. He calls me before walking away, either so he can ensure I gave him the right number or so I can save his contact, too.

For a moment, he stands there, like he’s waiting for something more, and my head spins with implications. The silence is awkward until he manages a grin. “I’ll see you Saturday, then.”

I only nod in response, my head too busy trying to figure out what just happened to come up with an appropriate response.

A date? Did I really just agree to a fucking *date*?

I know I’m supposed to try to be normal now. And I guess this is even what normal people do. But this feels, somehow, like a betrayal. Whether it’s a betrayal of myself or Remy, I don’t know, and I don’t care to contemplate it.

When he turns to walk away, he nearly steps right into Moose’s broad chest.

“Sorry, man.” Austin says sincerely, clapping Moose on the shoulder. When Moose only continues to glare at him, Austin sidesteps him and turns around to smile at me.

As soon as he clears the room, one of Moose’s perfect, dark eyebrows lifts. “What's Saturday?”

I roll my eyes and don't bother trying to walk around him, clipping his shoulder instead as I pass him. His long strides follow right behind me. I can't outpace him… the only time I get away from him is when I’m in my apartment with the door locked. And even then, I know he isn't far… just next door, watching, waiting, and generally creeping me out.

Moose has made no show of interest in me in the six months since he’s been here. He’s made no show of interest in *any* woman since he’s been here. Maybe men do it for him, or maybe he’s asexual. Either way, he doesn’t creep me out because he looks like he wants to fuck me or peel my skin off. He creeps me out because he’s so intense. Any time he’s near, I can *feel* the energy shift. He unsettles me, and while I’m confident he wouldn’t hurt me since Remy is paying him to do the exact opposite, I can just tell that he’s more than capable of it.

Moose looks like the man you call when you need a problem solved. He looks like the man who can make a goddess fall from Mount Olympus to offer herself up at her own temple. And he looks like the kind of man who can ruin your life in a million dark, and beautiful, and terrifying ways.

He may not have shown any interest in me, but I know he won’t be thrilled when I tell him what I’m doing Saturday. “I have a date.”

The displeasure is obvious in his dark eyes, which flicker with something like anger. I don’t bother facing him head-on. Just a glance from the corner of my eye shows me all that I need to see. It seeps into his voice, too, making his words tense when he asks, “Where are we going?”

I stop so abruptly that he runs into the back of me, and if it weren't for his quick reflexes, reaching out and grabbing me, I'd have fallen straight to the ground. That only makes my irritation all the more obvious. “Not *we*, Moose. *Me*. I’m going on a date. You can stay home and torture puppies or whatever you do when you're not breathing down my neck.”

“I don't torture puppies,” he chuckles. “Just humans.”

“I know.” I snap. “You’ve tortured me every day for the last six months.”

“Anybody ever told you you're melodramatic?”

“Has anybody ever told *you* that you're an asshole?”

“Oh, come on, Claire.” He chides. “You can do better than that.”

I narrow my eyes at him, wondering if he’s referring to my insult, or to the man I’m going out with. Obviously, I know I can do better than Austin. I already did.

It isn’t that there’s even anything wrong with Austin. He just isn’t Remy. I’m unsure what his kiss tastes like, how he likes his coffee, or even if he likes coffee at all. I’ve never been in his arms, so I’m not sure if it will feel like I’m meant to nestle there, or if our bodies will fit together like they were made for one another. But at one point in time, I was drawn to him. And Remy isn’t an option, so what’s the harm?

“Take a night off,” I suggest. “And maybe use it to get laid.”

Moose’s eyes are unamused as they wash over me. “Worry about your own love life, princess.”

A shrill chirp confirms that he unlocked the car door, so I pull the handle open and slide into the passenger seat. “What's love got to do with it?”

I’m not looking for love from Austin Lennon. I’m looking for someone to make me feel alive again, no matter how quickly it passes.

Moose has been following me around for months on Remy’s demand. In all that time, I've never seen anything to indicate that he’s capable of understanding something as complex as love.

“Touché.”

I reach for the radio dial, but Moose’s hand shoots out at the same time, landing on the button before me. He doesn’t have to grin for me to see how smug he is.

God, I hate him. And I hate Remy for forcing him to follow me around like a brooding, mopey puppy. Except Moose is neither cute nor cuddly. That’s not to say he’s bad-looking, obviously. Rhea has been lusting after him since the moment he showed up on our doorstep.

Where Remy is refined, Moose is rough. Where Remy is sophisticated, Moose is low-brow. I suppose it’s easy to look like Remy does when respect is already given to him. A man like Moose probably had to earn it, and though I don’t like him, I figure he probably thought if he looked more intimidating, people would treat him like he was.

He’s lean but dangerous with more muscles than brains. Everything below his chiseled jaw is covered in tattoos. They’re the kind that you expect to see on middle-aged men who’ve had time to acquire them, but by all accounts, he seems to be about the same age as Rhea and me. He raises a

lot of eyebrows on campus thanks to his take-no-prisoners attitude and body art, but no one ever seems to question his age. He also has no interest in getting to know me, so I can't exactly ask him how long he's known Remy. I mean, I could, but he wouldn't answer. He doesn't tell me anything about himself, including whether his name is really Moose, or if maybe he's Canadian, or if maybe that was just a fond nickname from a certain king of hell.

I also can't ask Remy. We haven't talked since the day I flew home… the day he fucked me like a whore, threw me over the side of his boat, and told me there was no future for us. And then he drove me to the airport, walked me all the way to my gate, and watched me board the plane. That was the end of 'us'. We were never a couple, so there was technically never an 'us', but *whatever* had been between us just ended in that instant.

Except, it hasn't. He still owns more of me than I think even I do. He occupies my thoughts, infiltrates my dreams. The scars on my body that weren't even left by him are claimed by him, and when I need release, my freaking orgasms are his, too. It's maddening, particularly because he made me feel like he didn't care about me that last day we were together. But then he went and hired a bodyguard to shadow me, so he either cares about me in some stupid way, or he wants to know he's torturing me. Either way, it's not exactly like I'm in a good position to reach out to him… especially because I'm *trying* to get him out of my head.

On that plane ride home, when Senator Massarini blocked me into my seat, I'd thought it was all over. I was certain he'd stab me with whatever they used when Jovich abandoned me to Wes' men, that he'd drag me off the plane to some sort of underground dungeon where I'd never see the light of day again. Instead, he did a lot of talking and asked me a lot of random questions, and when we parted ways, he shook my hand like that entire interaction hadn't been weird… like we really were just two strangers on a plane.

When there was a knock on my door hours after I got back to my apartment, I thought maybe he'd just waited for me to let my guard down, that he was coming to snatch me from a less crowded place than an airport. But it was Dimitri, who the Boudreaux's had sent to keep an eye on me. Rhea was, predictably, upset when I flew home without her. But she stayed with her brother long enough to wrap up some business with the family assets and whatever rich people do.

It was a shock, but it was nice to see him, especially because he confirmed that when I'd been with Wes and Remy, he and Rhea had gone to have my birth control tested. Unsurprisingly, that *was* the culprit. Only some of the pills had been replaced, likely so that it would be harder to detect when I died if someone started poking around. Also unsurprisingly, I haven't been poisoned since getting back home. Dimitri said there were no prints other than mine and his from when I gave it to him, which was a step I hadn't expected him to take, but clearly, someone had. I'm still fairly certain that despite how everything unraveled between us, Remy didn't mean it quite so literally when he told me he had been poisoning me.

My money is still on Elaine.

It was awkward at first, and then it was comforting, having Dimitri around. But when Rhea came home, it went right back to being awkward until Remy called him back to Costa Rica and sent Moose and Eli as his replacements. We didn't realize they were anything more than our new neighbors—until they started following us everywhere. When Rhea first found out, she called her brother. I could hear her yelling from across the apartment. But whatever excuse he gave her, it must have satisfied her at least a little bit, because she reluctantly came to accept it.

Of course, it doesn't hurt that Eli, whom Remy had ordered to keep watch over her, is attractive and far better tempered than Moose. A small part of me wonders if that was by design and if he's trying to keep me from developing an attachment to someone who spends so much time with me. More likely than not, he just didn't want Rhea to get attached to a man like Moose. But still, I have to wonder why he's going to such great lengths. If someone were coming for me, surely, they would have done so by now. I was sold to some anonymous bidder almost a year ago, and we were warned many times that someone would come for me. And yet, no one ever has.

What no one knows is that I'm not sitting around waiting for someone to come for me.

I'm going to come for them. Because I'm not a fucking doe.

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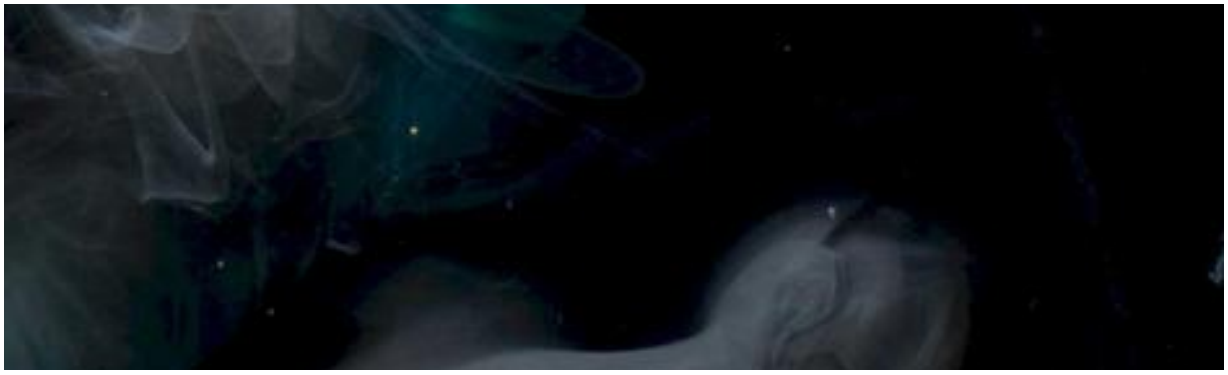

I almost wish Michael would open his mouth and start spouting some bullshit. The quiet is unsettling, sinking into my bones and setting my teeth on edge. No one says anything as we converge, clearing each room of the ground floor along the way. Doors fly open, but no one shrieks, no one cries, no shots are fired. The house is so damn empty I don't think so much as a roach has come into the place since whoever left it last.

It feels like a tomb, and though no one says as much, we're all thinking it. I can tell by the tension in the air, the feeling of desolation we're all sharing. I've put months into gathering the right team for this, and now it feels like a mistake. I should have come here, guns blazing, right after I knew Claire was safe. I should have been more urgent in trying to fulfill my promise to Davos.

But I know the home isn't the only part of this place. There's also the cellar—the cages, the computers where they keep records of their dealings, the surgical suite. There's so much more right under our feet, and while I'm smart enough to know it's all likely been cleared out, too, I am also stupid enough to hope.

When we step into the hidden elevator, Rook shakes his head in awe. "Fucking rich people."

I don't pay attention to who laughs.

The power to the house hasn't been shut off, so we cram into the elevator and descend into the depths of Hell. I steady my breaths, taking shallow ones through my nose.

No one knows what happened the last time I was here. At least, none of the guys at my back. They know only what I've told them, which is that this is where they keep their victims. And what a group of people I've pulled together, all willing to believe me on word alone, brazenly following me through the gates of hell for the chance to right someone else's wrongs.

When the silver doors open, the first thing I notice is the smell. It hits us square in the face, a wall of decay that pushes us back into the elevator as Michael, Rich, and Rook devolve into a coughing, gagging mess.

"What is that?" Someone cries from over my shoulder. I don't turn to see who it was, and I don't bother answering.

My hands are sweaty against the gun, which I hold steady before me, despite the fact that I know I won't need it down here. I can tell before I even step my first foot over the elevator that if there's anyone down here, they're not going to be any kind of threat to us.

The biometric scanner and lock have been disabled, thanks to Dimitri, and the big steel door that separated the cages from the rest of the space has been left ajar without the security measures in place. Beyond the door is dark, but as we walk, the space ahead of us illuminates with canned light, and the faint flickering sound echoes through the empty hall around us.

"Stay sharp," Kent warns, though he knows as well as I do that what we are smelling is decomposition. Death.

There isn't a chance in hell someone is hiding in there subjecting themselves to that smell if they don't have to.

"If you find any survivors, get them out immediately. No questions asked, no fucking around."

Again, nobody says anything.

I take center point, trying to ignore the dread that doubles with each step I take. But the dread doesn't do a fair job of warning us what we're about to walk in on.

Last time I was here, everything was clean and sterile… cold, immaculate, clinical. And it had been horrifying enough then. But now? It's absolute carnage.

The walls and floor are painted red with the blood that spilled out from the bodies on the ground. Bodies that used to be human, blood that used to be in their veins.

"Oh, God. This—" Michael mutters, the rest of his words swallowed in a wave of vomit as he turns and falls to his knees, retching.

From behind me, I hear someone muttering the lord's prayer. Most likely Rook. I don't bother to inform him that God has no place here. This is the devil's doing.

Rich and Kent press on as if this isn't the most horrific thing they've ever seen, but I'm suddenly rooted to the spot. All the sound seems to have been sucked out of the room; I can see mouths moving, see my crew flipping bodies over, their boots barely leaving tracks in the dried blood as they look for anything that will make this entire mission worth something.

I'm not entirely surprised Davos is gone, honestly. He'd have to be stupid to stay here after the threats I made to him. Even if he didn't take me seriously, staying here waiting for me to come get him would be a touch on the nose. And I knew he left the country, at least for a little while, when I thought he was coming to get his son. Now, I can't help but wonder if he did this when he left Zurich that time… almost seven months ago.

I also don't know if I'm more disturbed about when he did this or *why*? He told me years ago that he could turn a body into cash in no less than a dozen ways, so why would he slaughter his prisoners? If he fled the country because of my threat, why wouldn't he take them with him? I know this isn't his only storehouse. They keep the children somewhere else, and I am also certain that they have facilities in other countries, though maybe not quite as established as this one. It can't have been hard to move them. He has his own private jet, and he has a couple for business, too. These women didn't waltz in here to be chained up, so why didn't he bother to take them back the way he brought them? They were worth more alive than dead.

I jump when I notice the hands on my arms, the person shaking me. Dom.

When did he get here?

"No survivors, Boudreaux." Kent says quietly, waiting for my command.

My mouth is dry, my chest heavy with the breaths I'm trying not to take. I wonder how many of these women were here the day I was brought here. How many of them lived in constant terror, an endless nightmare, just waiting for the day they could be put out of their misery?

"What's the call, Rem?" Dom asks, glancing from me to the bodies littering the floor.

Not much is left of them. Even the maggots had to move on, with nothing but bones and hair left to litter the floor. I'd worry they'd all starved to death if it weren't for the blood everywhere.

“We swept the entire place.” Dom offers, realizing I must not have heard anything he said. “The tech is all gone. No computers, no hard drives. It’s empty.”

It takes a minute to tear my eyes away from the skeleton at my feet. Her red hair is sprawled neatly around her in a halo effect. My gut twists, and my heart hammers as I try to remember the last time I heard anything about Genevieve.

“Rook.”

It takes a moment, but Rook draws up to my side. When he sees the direction I’m staring, his eyes follow mine to the pile of bones… and the hair around it. Even with all the blood dried dark and muddy around her, that hair is starkly different. “When was the last time you talked to Gen?”

“Gen?” Rook sounds puzzled a minute, and then understanding takes hold. “That’s not her, Rem. Get that out of your head.”

“How do we know that?” I demand, pulling my gaze from her just long enough to meet his. “How can we tell that he didn’t find her and bring her back? He told me she was one of his favorites.”

“Because the world thought she was *dead*.” Rook reasons, shaking his head. “He had no reason to look for her. Finding her again would be like lightning striking twice. That’s not her.”

I can feel everyone’s confusion, can hear the quiet murmurs behind me as everyone tries to figure out what the hell is going on with me. *I* don’t even know what’s going on with me. There’s a small part of me that’s screaming that the thought in my head is irrational, baseless, and ridiculous. But that screaming sounds more like a whisper.

“Who’s Genevieve?” Michael asks someone.

No one answers, because only two people here know the answer to that. Dimitri wasn’t around when Genevieve was; she was before his time. Rook’s eyes flit behind me and he shakes his head, like he’s telling everyone not to ask anything else.

But my brain feels loose in my skull, and my tongue is loose in my mouth, and I can’t shake the feeling that I fucked up somewhere. The problem is, I don’t know where I fucked up. Was it when I told Davos I’d come for him, or when I told him I’d killed her myself? Was it when I didn’t even try to go to the police, the news station, the FBI after getting home from my first visit here? Was it in thinking that I could outsmart a man like Alexandre Davos?

“Genevieve,” It’s the first time I’ve said her name like this in years. It’s a whisper, because I can’t even make myself call her by her full name after seeing it inscribed on a tombstone next to my son’s. “Was my wife.”

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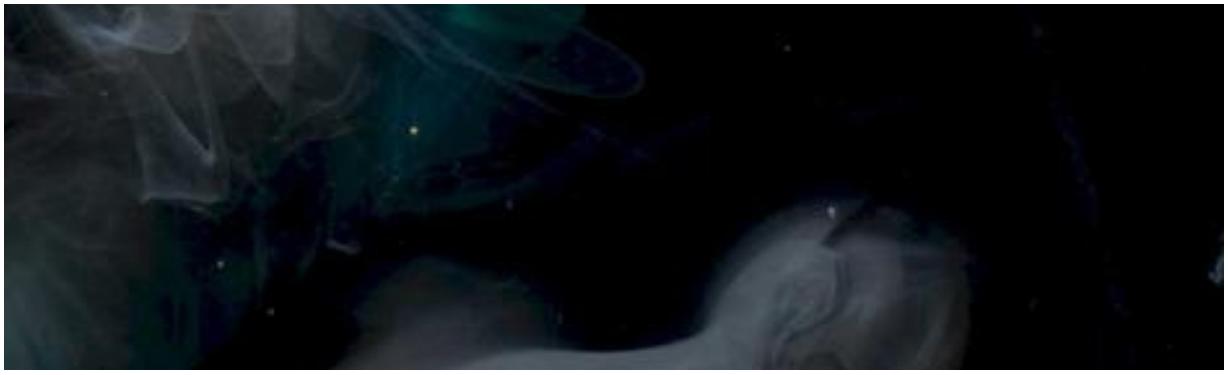

Moose has barely put the car in park before I throw my door open and barrel out. I have been, quite literally, tied up and at the wrong end of a blade, but I'm not sure if that was worse than Moose's company. At least that had been fleeting in the grand scheme of things.

I'm halfway across the parking garage when he catches up to me, walking at my side and taking joy in knowing that his mere presence makes me want to scream. As short as I am, I'm a fast walker, but his long legs carry him far without any effort. Honestly, I think the only thing he puts effort into is trying to annoy me.

No, scratch that. He doesn't even have to try at that. It's effortless.

Thankfully, he doesn't try to talk the rest of the way upstairs. It isn't until I'm fishing my keys out of my bag me that I hear him say, "See you for dinner at 7. Taco Tuesday, princess. I'll even let you have a margarita if you promise not to get sloppy."

"Fuck off." I snap, too tired to come up with anything better. It wouldn't matter anyway, because his door is already slamming shut as I fit my key in the lock.

Some fucking bodyguard. He can't even see me safely into my apartment? I almost wish someone would come and snatch me out of the hall, just to spite him. It would be preferable to going inside, anyway, because as soon as I open the door, I can hear Rhea's giggle and a not-so-subtle, *"Shh!"*.

I lock the door behind me and growl out my frustration, sick of the monotonous loop my life has become. I'm trying so hard to hang on. There are only two months of school left, and I should be studying for exams or soaking up the last few months of my senior year with my best friend, but instead, I'm hanging on to the mind-numbing thread of normalcy. As if I was ever normal to begin with.

Rhea pokes her head out from around the kitchen, licking the frosting off of a rubber spatula. "You're home early," she says, glancing at the time on the microwave to confirm what she just said.

"Yeah, well Howlett kicked us out early so he could go sleep with his mistress before his wife gets home." I roll my eyes, turning the corner just as Eli shimmies his jeans up his waist. His abs ripple, and an innocent dimple appears in the corner of his lip as he waves.

"Hello, Claire."

Flour coats his jeans and nearly every surface of the kitchen, and as Rhea turns to take in her mess, I notice the handprint on the back of her skirt. "Eli." I nod at him in greeting and turn to shake my head at Rhea. "I'm ordering takeout tonight."

"Oh, come on!" Rhea calls after me as I head to my room. "It's not like he was railing me while I stirred the salsa."

"No," Eli agrees. "But I did enjoy that blowjob while I was frosting the cupcakes."

God.

Sometimes I want to disappear into the floor. I don't know what would happen if I did—would I slip into an alternate reality, or sink straight to Hell? Either way, today is one of those days.

"I'm going to shower." I call behind me. "Try not to set the kitchen on fire."

Eli chuckles, and Rhea laughs with him. "She meant that literally, not figuratively."

The sound of his hand clapping against her ass is the last thing I hear before I shut my door and spin the lock. Rhea's peel of laughter cuts through the wood, but I hit play on Spotify and turn the volume up just as my favorite song comes on.

Having a rich friend has its perks, even when that friend is a nymphomaniac who can't keep her conquests private. We both have our own ensuite, which means I don't have to subject myself to their ridiculous

sexcapades again just to get in the shower. It also means she won't find what I'm hiding in the back of the toilet.

I can be convinced to believe that keeping the gun Dimitri gave me was ridiculous. I don't know how to use the damn thing and knowing that it's there doesn't really give me the peace of mind he thought it would. As if someone is going to come slip past not one but *two* bodyguards? As if I'd have time to get to the gun in an emergency.

I feel like a drug dealer every time I take the heavy lid off the back of the toilet and pluck the waterproof bag from the reserve. That feeling only grows every time I take out the burner phone—an ancient brick with a freaking antenna on it that I have to tap the keys on several times to get to the right letter when I'm sending a text.

When he gave me these for an emergency, Dimitri told me to keep them hidden, and that's exactly what I've done. I'd bet my life that Rhea would never betray me, but he was insistent that I not let anyone see these items and find a good hiding spot. He warned me that the apartment could be bugged and wired, which would explain the random times I feel like someone is watching me… or maybe I just get that feeling sometimes because he put that idea in my head. Either way, if there's a camera in my bathroom, I really hope someone is enjoying my shower performances. It would be a shame for those to go to waste.

I avoid the gun, slipping the phone from the bag and powering it on to see if I have any new messages. It takes a minute, but eventually, the little rectangle pops up, so I open the message and read the single line of text written there:

Send the next installment & I'll send the address.

My heart hammers at the words on the screen, their implication. I've been waiting months for this… or rather, I've waited months for the address.

I know this isn't what Dimitri intended when he gave me this phone. He wanted me to keep it handy in case anyone took mine from me… like if I get kidnapped again.

Little does he know, I'm using it for the exact opposite.

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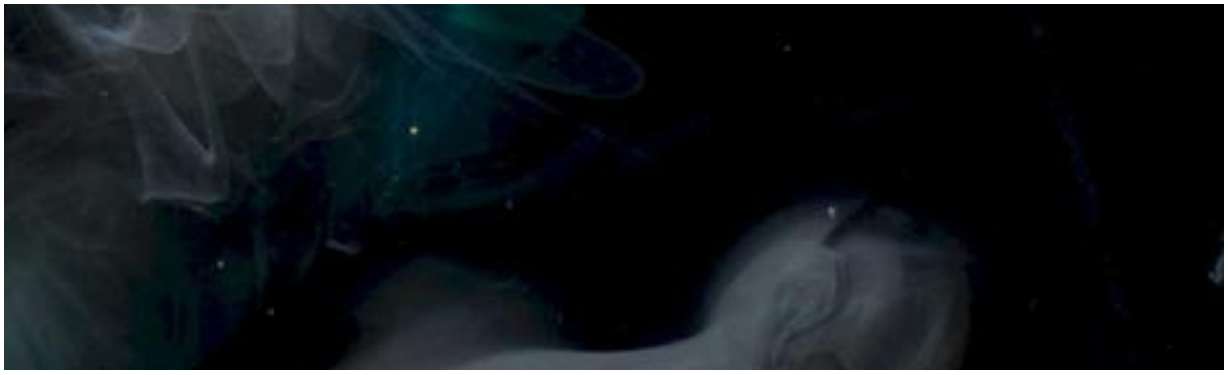

The crew doused the house in kerosene and Harley lit the match, but I threw it.

Watching the place go down in flames wasn't nearly as satisfying as it ought to be. The failure sits square on my shoulders, weighing me down even though I didn't have this team ready to go when those women likely died. I should have had it ready. I should have got it together from the start. I let Davos think I was playing by his rules because I knew I couldn't operate within the law to make a difference… not when the game was rigged against me. What I didn't think about doing was finding people like me back then. Davos had told me that they breed their soldiers—it's why he forced Genevieve to fuck me that first night I met her, why she ended up pregnant with our son. It's why I was born—why Wes was born.

As much as I hate my stupid half-brother, I should have realized what he was all along. He and I are more alike than I will ever admit out loud, more alike than I want to even think about. We were both dragged into our father's bullshit, given two different jobs. Mine, thankfully, let me stay out of the fray. To that end, I kept my head down and tried not to make waves. I watched a hundred girls slip through the cracks, and I only reached out a hand a few times. It's better than serving them up for him, but, like me, I'm beginning to realize, Wes never had a choice.

Except he did. Because he hated our mother, he hates me and Rhea, and he hates his own father. I haven't seen a single person on this earth that he

does care for, which makes me wonder if he was blackmailed and coerced into his position the way I was for mine or if he walked into it willingly.

If I had to do it over again, I still wouldn't give up the people I loved to escape this life. They'd have killed everyone I loved, everyone I *should* have loved, and then me. I could have died for them… I *would* have died for them. But I still wouldn't let them be killed in exchange for my freedom. And despite my efforts, that list has only grown since I first got into this. Monica, Rhea, my mother, Genevieve, Courtney, Tinsley, Claire…

Fucking Claire.

Thinking about her hurts as much as the massacre we stumbled upon earlier. And I know that's fucked—comparing the horrific deaths of multiple women to one crazy, intoxicating woman who woke up and realized how bad I was for her. They're two totally different losses, and yet they hurt all the same. It's visceral, like having something taken away from me.

If I'd just been man enough to admit to Claire the reason I can't give her what she wants— no. It wouldn't make a difference because it wouldn't make her want those things any less or make me want them anymore. I need to let her go, but it's been months, and she still fills the space in my head when my thoughts begin to wander... like now.

She's ruined me for anyone else; I haven't even tried to fuck someone yet. How could I when she's there every time I close my eyes? It's her that I imagine sinking into every time I wrap my fist around myself, and her name on my tongue when I wake from the rare bits of sleep, stolen fragments threaded together by the things we do in the light of day.

The only thing that helps me not to think of her is to fixate, which is less than ideal today. It's why I've been staring at this file for thirty minutes without processing a single word of it.

My tired eyes blur over the name that I've read a dozen times.

Carrington Hardin.

What the hell kind of name is Carrington? Maybe that's why I can't retain any of this file—I can't get past his stupid ass name. It has to be a pseudonym… a fake identity to protect whatever monster is depraved enough to try and purchase another human being. But Dimitri had done his due diligence, checking and double-checking every detail, and he was sure.

Carrington Hardin has no criminal record, no prior offenses, not even a parking ticket or a traffic violation. His address at 875 Willoughby Lane,

Newcastle WA, has been in his name for the last twenty-two years.

The photo clipped to the front must be his ID picture because he's smiling widely and looks a bit younger than the only other picture inside, where his face is creased with the effects of time. An aerial view of his house revealed a quaint two-story cottage in a similarly-curated neighborhood. Nothing about this man or his file suggests he's anything beyond a simple man with terrible taste in clothing. He certainly doesn't scream serial killer or rapist. But I know not to judge a book by its cover, so Dimitri will be going to pay him a visit in the not-so-distant future.

All of the information surrounding this guy was so hard to get ahold of that I spent months digging for it. I had anticipated somebody powerful, wealthy, *elite*. Carrington Hardin doesn't appear to be any of that.

I'm grateful when the phone rings. I've been puzzling over the file in front of me for what feels like hours, and I'm no closer to making sense of it. Either Carrington is a criminal mastermind, or I'm missing something.

"Rhea? Is everything alright?"

My sister never calls me. I call her once a month, regularly enough that she could set a clock by it. We occasionally text in between, but this is unheard of. It's good to hear her voice, though I can already sense she's about to give me a hard time about something.

"Everything's *fine,* Remy. You've made sure of that." As my younger sister, Rhea has a penchant for giving me attitude. I'm sure she just rolled her eyes at me as she said that.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," I say, sensing where she's going with this. "Did you call to complain, or did that just happen on its own?"

That gets a little chuckle out of her. "Both. Look, Remy, it's been months… almost a year. Jovich is dead. You killed the men who came after Claire. So, what are you doing here? I mean, with Eli and Moose."

"I'm covering my bases, Rhea. You know it's my responsibility to keep you safe."

"I know." She agrees. "And I also know that we haven't had any issues since that night. The guys are glorified babysitters, and Claire and I are adults. We don't need them following us around all the time."

"And here I thought you and Eli were getting along a little *too* well."

There's a long pause as she weighs her options, and then she decides to go for deniability. "I don't know what you're talking about."

“From what I've heard, you seem to be thoroughly enjoying each other's presence. I appreciate that you made the best of this situation.”

I’m not thrilled about the idea of her sleeping with her bodyguard, but I suppose it at least gives him a vested interest. I knew that Rhea would probably end up in this situation regardless of which of the men I assigned to her. She doesn't have a definitive type, which means anybody who piques her interest is fair game. I’m not really sure if Claire has a type either, but if she does, I’m fairly certain it isn't Moose. That’s precisely why I tasked him with keeping *her* safe.

“Eli told you?” Rhea groans.

“Moose did, actually.”

“He's jealous.” Rhea doesn’t miss a beat. “He and Claire can’t stand each other.”

“That's a shame.” I say dryly. To be honest, the thought sparks the slightest joy for me… knowing that I’m not paying her bodyguard to touch what’s mine. It also means when I watch her touching herself under the covers on the cameras I had hidden in her apartment, it’s not Moose she’s thinking of.

“It *is* a shame,” Rhea agrees. “Claire needs a little bit of stability in her life.”

I open my mouth to tell her that I know Moose to be quite reliable, but even over the phone she senses the sarcasm that was about to come. “I mean, she needs a little bit of *normalcy*. To go out, meet new people, go on a date without some big guy following her around, scaring off anyone who dares to look at her.”

I fail to see the problem that Rhea believes there to be. Of course, I won't tell them as much, but I don't want other men looking at her. It’s selfish and stupid, but I don't really care. I still don't understand exactly what it is that drew me to Claire. I had thought having her in my bed would help satisfy the craving. It hadn't. The intensity had waned once she was no longer in my house, but it’s still there no matter how deeply I try to bury it. She’s under my skin, running through my veins like a drug that won’t bleed out no matter how long it’s been.

“What do you want me to do?” I sigh. “I can't just leave you unprotected.”

“So then maybe give us some space? Claire has a date on Saturday, and I'm sure she would really appreciate it if she didn't have to worry about

Moose skulking around behind her back.”

I bristle at the mention of a date, irritation curling through me.

I didn't expect her to stay single forever, but I also refuse to entertain the idea of her in someone else’s arms. “Eli can go in his place if you really need, but Remy, I’m not stupid. Either there’s something you aren’t telling me, or you don’t want Claire to be happy.”

She isn't exactly wrong. I want Claire to be happy… just not with someone else. But it doesn't really matter. What happened between us was a perfect storm of lust and chaos, passion and adrenaline.

Claire does deserve a little bit of normalcy.

“Okay,” I finally say. “Moose can have the night off. But I have one condition.”

“Of course you do.” Rhea probably hadn't expected anything less. “What is it?”

“Don’t fuck Moose, okay? I don’t want you getting mixed up with a guy like him.”

She gasps in indignation, and I wonder which part she’s taking objection to. But she doesn’t deny her quirks, instead asking, “A guy like *what*?”

“Nothing,” I tell her, not wanting to get into it. Moose is safe because I’m paying for his loyalty. I’ve already told him I don’t care what anyone offers him, if he keeps her safe, I’ll double it. And if they offer to double *that*, I’ll triple it. He’s a man of his word, and he’s damn good at the job he does. But I recognize the darkness in him. He has no boundaries; there are no depths he won’t go to for the right reason. It’s what makes him so damn good at what he does.

It's also what makes him dangerous.

“Okay.” She agrees. “One night shouldn’t be too bad.” There’s a moment where she sounds like she’s expecting something more, but instead, she fills the silence. “Rem? How much longer is this going to go on? We graduate in two months, and then what?”

“Don't worry,” I eye the picture of Carrington with his too-perfect smile. “It won't be this way much longer.”

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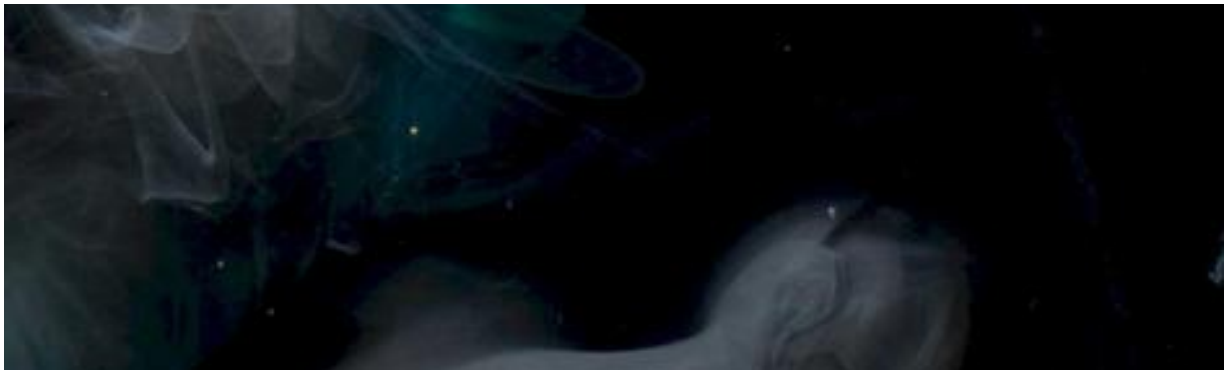

“You can come out of hiding now, Claire.” Rhea’s voice carries through the wood. “Eli’s gone.”

I close the book I’d been pretending I was reading, though I can’t fool myself, and stand up to open the door. Rhea’s leaning against my doorframe, shaking her head. “You’ve got to get laid.”

“That’s your solution for everything.” I laugh despite my frustration. She’s right. My own thoughts are haunting me, and it’s bad enough that I can’t stop thinking about what I’ve done. The other thing that runs a loop in my brain is my best friend’s brother…his savage kiss, his electric touch, the way he seemed to know my body better than I do. If I could just get him out of my head, maybe I could start trying to get some control over my life again.

“It rarely fails to help.” She grins, sitting on the edge of my bed and leaning back on her elbows.

“Yeah, well, it’s kind of hard to do with Moose always lurking.”

“So, do him then.” She shrugs as if that’s the obvious solution to my problems. “I bet he’s really good in bed.”

“Maybe *you* should sleep with him then.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time.” Rhea quips. “Seriously, if you don’t, I might have to.”

“I’m sure Eli would love that.”

“We aren’t exclusive. Besides, he might even be into it. He might want to watch.”

“Rhea!”

I’m used to her pushing me out of my comfort zone, and I’m used to her sexual appetite. But since Eli has been here, they’re like teenagers in love for the first time. They can’t get enough of one another. Honestly, it isn’t a bad thing. It certainly beats the alternative of having somebody like Moose as a shadow, like me. Even despite her casual attitude, I’m sure she has true feelings for him. “I’m serious, Claire. I know it’s been tough lately, but you’ve got to take your life back. And I’m not discrediting what you went through. I just think a little normalcy would do you good.”

Normalcy.

I don’t think Rhea knows what normal is, either. “Besides,” she smirks, knowing whatever she’s about to say is going to get a reaction out of me. “Remy would hate it.”

I blink, processing her words for a minute before they sink in. Remy would hate it. I’m pretty sure Remy would hate me fucking anyone besides him. He was pretty clear that even though there was no future between us, he wanted me to stay and continue to let him destroy me. He may not care for me, but he definitely liked fucking me. Obviously, that part was mutual. “Remy would hate it?”

“He told me so.” She grins, trying to contain her glee. “He told me, ‘*Don’t fuck Moose, okay*?” Her voice drops an octave in a poor impersonation of her brother. “*I don’t want you to get involved with a man like that’.”*

“An asshole?” I guess. “Because your brother is kind of an asshole, and he didn’t mind me hooking up with him.”

That gets a laugh out of her, but she shakes her head. I haven’t told her everything that happened between her brother and me. She knows everything up to the night of the funeral, but once she started having her own mental health crisis, I decided to keep the darker details from her. She knows that Wes got away when Remy and I were together, but she doesn’t know that Remy went into a jealous rage because I didn’t want Wes to die. She also doesn’t know he called me a bitch in heat or threw me over the side of his boat. And she definitely doesn’t know that I still get wet every time I think about the way he threw me on his bed and tied me up with the strings of my own bikini. I think I’d rather die than tell her that.

“Who knows?” She shakes her head. “And who cares? He fucked with your heart, you fuck with his head.”

As fun as that sounds, I'm not sure Remy's annoyance is worth fucking my bodyguard. I mean, Moose is hot. Sinfully, so. He's all hard edges, darkness without the shiny lacquer. He's everything Remy isn't, and yet they're cut from the same cloth. I don't doubt that Moose would break me harder than Remy… which is exactly what I asked for.

I purse my lips together, trying not to even debate the merits of having meaningless sex with another man. "You think I'm petty enough to sleep with him because Remy wouldn't like it?" I laugh, and Rhea doesn't hesitate to join me.

"You've known me long enough to take notes, Claire. I *guarantee* you could be petty enough. Besides, this isn't a dime store novel. I mean, what does he think? If he can't have you, no one can?" She scoffs. "Fuck that and fuck him. I mean, not literally." She chews the tip of her nail in thought as she contemplates her words. "Fuck *Moose* literally and Remy metaphorically."

I laugh, unable to help it. She's a bad influence. Always has been, and yet she's good for me. She has a way of knowing what I need even when I don't.

And Rhea is right, I deserve to have a little fun.

***

Taco Tuesdays are actually my favorite day of the week, particularly because tonight, we're going out. Moose was similarly appalled by the idea of cooking on the counter that Rhea and Eli fucked on, and neither of us trusted them enough to keep their hands off each other long enough to cook the meat.

Unfortunately, that means I'm stuck in the car with Moose on the way there so that Rhea can give Eli road head. They didn't say as much, but that's the conclusion that we came to when he grabbed his own set of keys after Moose already had his in hand.

"Fucking children." He grumbles, slipping behind the wheel and fitting his key in the ignition.

“You don’t like kids?” I tease, deciding it’s too early in the night to be in a bad mood. I decide not to match his glowering this time, though a ride in silence may be the better option.

“Nobody likes kids.” Moose snaps, cutting his eyes to me. “Let me guess, you were one of seven who grew up on a farm and babysat the commune children for free?”

I glare at him, wondering which part of that was supposed to be offensive before I realize he meant it *all* to be offensive. “Only child.” I say, glancing out the window at the cars that we pass, the lights that seem to bloom bright but then pass by so quickly. “Though I did live in lots of foster homes with multiple children, and sometimes I babysat the younger ones. Not that that was legal or anything, so usually just for a little at a time.”

“While the adults went to the corner store to meet the neighborhood drug dealer?”

“Jesus,” I shake my head at him. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Too many things to list, princess.” He flashes me a cocky grin that has no business being as attractive as it is. “But I’m more interested in what’s wrong with you, which is why I’m asking. You have to have a story, and there has to be a reason that Remington Boudreaux is paying me more than your tuition to keep you safe.”

I only stare at him, wondering how much my tuition actually costs. I’ve never bothered to look, since it’s all covered by scholarships. But now that I’m thinking about it, it has to be a lot. And Remy is paying him more than that?

“I don’t know how much my tuition is because I’m a scholarship kid.” I wait for him to make fun of me for that, but Moose keeps his eyes trained on the road ahead, so I continue. “How much is he paying you?”

“Not enough,” he shakes his head. “Considering how damn annoying you are. Do you ever just answer a question instead of talking circles around it?”

“I’m not—” I cut myself off, clearing my throat, and tuck my hair behind my ear. “Do you get off on trauma, Moose? You want all the gory details?”

“It takes a lot to get me off, princess. And no, hearing people’s sob stories doesn’t get me hard, so you’re safe.”

I roll my eyes at him though he’s not even looking to see it. “How about you tell me *your* sob story?” I challenge. “Or, better yet, let me guess? You’re the oldest of three, your father left after you were born, and…” I

pause, mulling it over, “and your mommy didn’t love you enough to stay sober. Am I close?”

I was aiming to piss him off, but Moose only laughs. “Youngest of two and mommy didn’t love me enough to stay alive after what happened to her. Good call on the daddy thing, though.”

His answer stuns me to silence for a moment. I’m just about to tell him I’m sorry when he starts speaking again. “My sister is only four years older than me, but she provided when our mom died. I don’t know how she did it, but she got food on the table, and she kept the state out of our house. She was only fifteen, but she managed somehow. Didn’t want the system to separate us.”

I swallow whatever words were on my tongue, trying to imagine losing a mother at such a tender age. The age-old question pops into my mind. Is it better to have loved and lost or to never have loved at all? At least never knowing my mother means that losing her didn’t hurt. You don’t hurt for what you don’t know. I feel her absence, have my whole life, but it’s not a conscious loss for me.

Inexplicably, I think of Remy. I think I’d rather never have loved him, either. Living without him hurts too fucking much.

Technically, I never told him I loved him, but what else could it have been? Love is the only thing I’ve heard of that makes people go crazy the way I did when I was with him.

“Your sister sounds amazing.” I say honestly. Rhea is like a sister to me, but what I wouldn’t have given to have someone looking out for me when I was growing up. Even if the majority of the homes I lived in hadn’t been bad, school was always a tossup. Being the new kid never gets easier.

“She is.” Moose confirms. “Which is why I take jobs for spoiled rich kids who want to throw their money at me to watch pretty, vapid girls stare into space during class.”

“Hey!” I snap, “I am not *vapid*!”

He raises an eyebrow when he turns to look at me, taking his eyes off the road for a disconcerting amount of time. He doesn’t say anything to argue his point, and it takes me a minute to realize the other part of his statement. *Pretty*.

Well, I guess he doesn’t think I’m dumb *and* ugly. The bar is low, I guess.

“So, you get paid a lot to follow me around and you send that money to your sister?”

“Yep.” He tips his head a little as he focuses on the road again. “It’s my turn to take care of her.”

The strangest jealousy flits through me at that, but I chase it away with another question. He’s never told me anything about himself—I’m going to press my luck. “What’s her name? Fawn?”

A laugh escapes him—a real laugh, genuine and uncontained. “Fawn?” He grins, gracing me with an appreciative grin. “You’re actually funny, Monroe.”

“I just thought maybe your mother was into an animal theme… moose, fawn…”

“I see what you did there. Don’t kill the joke.” His grin is wry as he relaxes into the seat, one arm draped over the steering wheel, looking decidedly less tense since we got in the car.

“Have you ever killed anyone, Moose?”

As soon as the words are out, I wish I could stuff them back in. What the ever-loving fuck possessed me to ask that?

But he doesn’t look annoyed by the question. In fact, a little smirk graces the corner of his lips instead. “Have *you* ever killed anyone, Claire?”

My heart skips a beat when he turns to me again.

The look in his eyes tells me that wasn’t a question.

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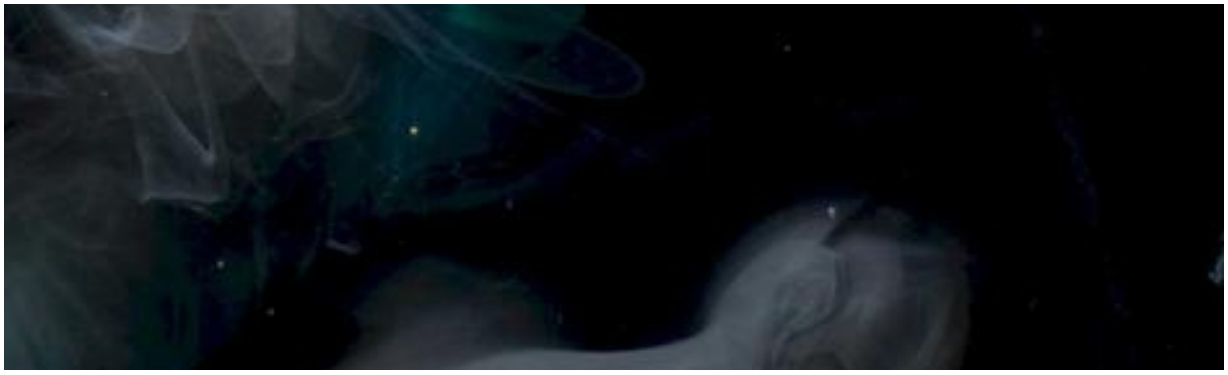

Dimitri didn’t bother flying home with the rest of us. Instead, he took a separate plane to the States while the rest of us flew back to Costa Rica. I’m not keen on the house guests, so I’d have gone in place of him, but I hate the States more than I hate having people in my house. I also don’t think I’d be able to resist the temptation to stop off at Darrington and pay a visit to my sister.

Besides, as far as house guests go, none of them are terribly exhausting.

Harley sleeps in the room next to me, and I don’t know whether that should be a comfort or not. I watched her crush the tablet camera I’d used to spy on my previous house guest within ten seconds of me showing her to her room. It’s just as well because I have no interest in her beyond whether she intends to murder me in my sleep.

If someone breaks in, at least, I have faith they won’t make it past her door… and that’s assuming they make it past Dom, who is staying in the adjacent room, where Rhea used to.

Most of the guys are staying out in the guesthouse, though they infiltrate my space during the daytime. I guess I can’t blame them—Elaine has made it her job these last few weeks to keep them fed. Honestly, I don’t know how I’ll ever get rid of them once we take Davos out. They’ve grown comfortable around here—so comfortable that Rich walks into my kitchen in just his boxers.

“Jesus, Dick.” Kent groans, throwing the kitchen towel that Elaine discarded a few moments prior.

“I know,” Rich grins. “It’s big, right?”

Next to me at the bar, Harley lifts a single eyebrow, clearly unimpressed. “If you think that’s big, I have an uncle who’s a Nigerian Prince and would love to write you into his will.”

“Sign me up,” Rich smirks, dropping onto the bar stool beside her.

“There’s ladies around here,” Rook grumbles, shaking his head from across the kitchen.

“Who are you calling a lady?” Harley snaps, narrowing her eyes on him.

If Elaine hadn’t just resumed chopping the onion, I’d be worried Harley would snatch the knife and use my bouncer as target practice.

“La*dy*,” Kent amends. “Elaine is a lady. Cross is— Cross is a different breed.”

Harley grins at that, choosing to take his words as a compliment. The morale on the plane ride back was decidedly shit, and the last few days have been morose, so even I appreciate the mood lightening. It also helps that we’ve readjusted, setting our sights on another of Davos’ properties. We leave tomorrow, which is the soonest we can go since Dimitri just got back. It’s the whole reason we’ve all assembled here in my kitchen.

When Dimitri walks in with Michael at his side, he gets a single look at us before the laugh escapes him. “What is this, the Justice League? Has Elaine made us matching costumes?”

I’m guessing he’s punch-drunk from jet lag, but he doesn’t look tired. In fact, he looks genuinely amused with himself. “Funny.” I roll my eyes at him.

I want everyone else to disappear so that I can ask Dimitri what he learned about our friend in Washington, but we’re here to go over the plan for tomorrow’s raid. Once we’ve got everyone on the same page, I can pull him aside and hope no one cares enough to wonder what I want with him. Although, Elaine’s watchful eyes tell me she knows *something* is going on.

I’ve never made my housekeeper privy to the inner workings of my family’s business, so she definitely doesn’t know what I do. She didn’t come to work for me until after Genevieve, and the ones after her were easily explained as flings I’d brought home from exotic locations. Elaine was able to accept that, but somewhere in between Claire and Rhea coming to stay and this unlikely ragtag crew I assembled, I think she’s started to pay attention. She’s not as hostile toward me anymore, at least.

“Ah, yes!” Rich grins. “Elaine was waiting on your measurements to finish them, actually.”

“Leave Elaine out of this.” Rook shakes his head, glowering. “If you want to measure dicks, I’m sure she’ll let you borrow a magnifying glass.”

Kent chokes on the beer he’s been nursing since we gathered down here, and Dom laughs so loud I think he’s about to piss himself. Rich opens his mouth for a retort, but Michael shuts it all down as he drops a folder on the island we’re all crowded around.

The photo paperclipped to the outside cover shows an old stone façade—sweeping arches and cobblestone turrets. It looks like a castle, like the place kids dream of going to visit. But dreams aren’t made in that castle—nightmares are.

It's a somber shift—one that sucks the humor right out of the room.

“Fuck.” Kent mutters, shaking his head in disbelief.

“A fucking castle?” Harley growls, capturing Elaine’s attention. I see her eyes cut to us from where she stands at the stove.

I haven’t gone to great lengths to hide any of what we’ve been up to from Elaine, and I won’t. If Davos hadn’t already been putting the pieces together, I’m sure my cover was blown when I threatened him with a painful death. There’s no one to pretend for now—Rhea knows the truth about our dark legacy, my demonic employer knows I’m gunning for him, and I couldn’t care less what the rest of the world thinks of me. This is more important than maintaining a clean image—this is about revenge. Mine, Claire’s, Genevieve’s, Courtney’s, Tinsley’s, Rhea’s… my mother’s. The only people in this world who have given me the things I need to survive have been women—and they’ve all been victims of a system that’s designed to ruin them.

Somewhere along the line, this stopped being about my need to make Davos pay for what he did to me, and it started being more about the other lives he’s ruined. If Elaine wants to know what I do, if she wants to see nameless faces when she closes her eyes, then she is welcome to it. My burden has gotten too heavy to bear alone.

Michael looks to me for approval to continue giving us the debrief. I nod, permission granted, and he flips the file open.

“You may not be ready for dinner after this,” he says coolly.

We went into our last mission guns blazing, and it proved to be the wrong approach. But this time, we’ve done our research. This time, we have

someone on the inside. I didn't ask for details, but Michael had a guy do a little reconnaissance. And judging by the contents in front of me, I'd say the man either works for the CIA or he missed his calling as a spy, because how he got this information out of there, I'll never know.

"About twenty kilometers outside Auvergne, France. Just a little daytrip from the infamous Red Light District. But this," Michael jabs his finger at the file, "This was set up for people who want more than just seven minutes in heaven."

Next to him, Dimitri looks like he wants to vomit. His entire body seems to fold in on itself when he cringes, which is an impressive feat given he's well over six and a half feet.

"It's a brothel?" Harley guesses, looking at the rows of photos.

I've seen something like that before.

It's a menu, organized by skin tone, hair color, eye color, body shape. No one has reached for the photos that scattered out—only head shots, thank fuck—but the way they fell, I can see that there are a few pages in the back with men on them.

"Something like that." Michael says. "From what my source said, these captives come from other parts of the system… they aren't simply pulled off the street and tossed into this lifestyle. They're… trained."

Trained.

Now I feel like I'm gonna be sick. But I've come to realize that's just the way the rage affects me some days. "Sometimes it's a punishment. Sometimes, it's a last chance to stay alive. Some of the prisoners are owned by the company, some of them have a contract for their work. '*Rich politician whose wife cheated on him, so he wants her to suffer for a year'*, sort of thing."

"Jesus." Dom groans.

"Trust me, he isn't present there." Michael shakes his head. "This is the devil's territory. These people—their name is the first thing taken from them. They're all just numbers there. The next thing they take… well, depending on what they're there for, they take their ability to have children. Sterilize them. Not all of them. Apparently, they have a clientele who come specifically for the pregnant ones."

There's a gasp as Elaine drops the pot of water she was taking off the stove and jumps back, her toes just barely missing the boiling water that sizzles against the floor. Harley and Kent jump into action to pull her

further from the mess, while Rich steps gingerly through the puddle to retrieve the pot. Thankfully, she hadn't yet started boiling the noodles or else we'd be picking those up, too.

I don't move as everyone frets over my housekeeper, asking whether she's certain she's alright and if she needs anything. I simply stare at her, trying to decide what exactly she knows.

When her eyes snap up to mine, they're full of tears she looks like she's struggling to hold onto. Her lips are open around whatever she isn't saying, quivering like the words are trying to push themselves out. "Yes, Elaine?" I ask calmly.

I watch her throat work to swallow, see her wipe a tear from her cheek. "There's… something I need to tell you."

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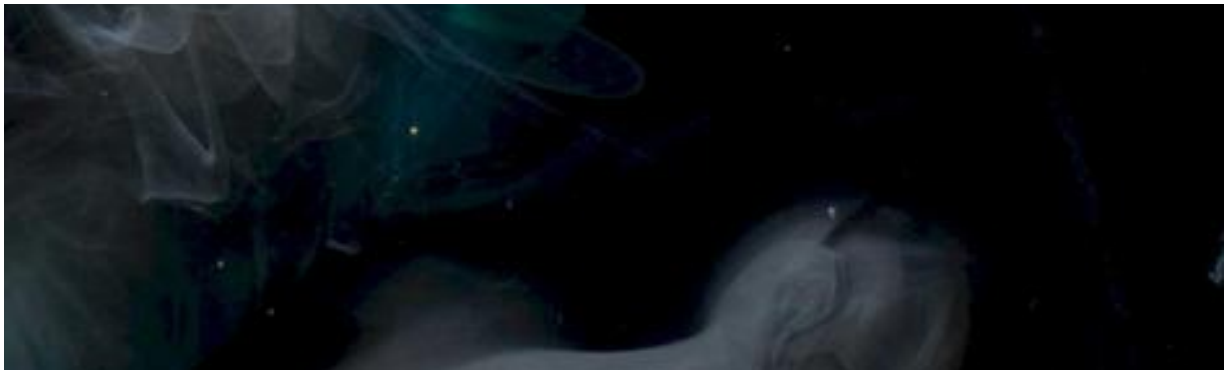

Taco Tuesday was decidedly uneventful, unless you count Rhea drinking too much and making a spectacle of us. I don't, since that's pretty par for the course with her, but I could tell how much Moose hated the attention being on us. I couldn't figure out if it was because he didn't want to be in the fold with us or because it made his job more challenging when she captured the attention of everyone in the room. Of course, that's normal for her too. Heads swing in her direction whenever she walks by, and it's got to do with more than just her sultry eyes and the way she walks, like a model on the catwalk. She just has an aura that's hard to deny. It's what drew me to her, after all.

And it's what I'm worried about happening tonight when I leave Moose alone with her so that I can go on my date with Austin. It's stupid and petty and pathetic that I don't want her to sleep with him, especially when you consider that I can hardly stand him. Or at least, I tell myself I can hardly stand him. I'm not so sure nowadays. Ever since Rhea suggested fucking him, I've been thinking about it… almost obsessively.

"The best way to get over someone is to get under someone else," Rhea had said.

And she was probably right, because as long as I'm thinking about seducing Moose, I'm not thinking about Remy… or at least I'm not thinking about how much I miss him, how much I want him to come drag me back to him. I'm only thinking about how much it would piss Remy off,

knowing he hadn’t wanted me to leave, but he couldn’t offer what I needed to stay.

But I won’t be getting under Moose. That’s a disaster waiting to happen, and the only disaster I want to be part of is the kind I create. The kind that makes men cry, makes them hurt. I don’t know if it’s lust or blood lust that’s making me agree to this night—a night out without my best friend, without my shadow, without inhibitions or restraint. Whatever it is, it’s going to strangle me if I don’t give it some sort of offering to keep it at bay, so tonight, I’m channeling the girl I left behind in Costa Rica.

I must look as different as I feel, like I switch skins as I flip a switch in my brain, because when I step out of my room, Eli’s jaw gapes and Moose looks momentarily caught off guard, as if he’s not sure who just stepped out the door. It’s fair, of course. They haven’t seen this side of me.

Being in Costa Rica, having Remy at my side or just knowing he was at my back, had made me feel bold, confident, and unafraid for the first time in my life. I was even a little unhinged in the best way, because I had him as a security net. I knew that if I fell, he’d catch me in those black wings of his like the fallen angel he is. Without the comfort of him and with a shattered heart, I reverted back to who I was before him. But I am not the same girl I was before him, so I never should have bothered pretending I was. The last few months have crawled by and yet I have nothing to show for them, because I haven’t been living.

Tonight, that changes.

“Damn, Monroe.” Eli says appreciatively, his eyes sweeping me up and down. Next to me, Rhea smirks without the faintest bit of jealousy, which only makes me feel worse about hoping she doesn’t fuck my bodyguard tonight.

“What the fuck are you wearing?” Moose glowers.

Moody motherfucker.

“It’s called a corset.” I smile at him with a sugary sweet disposition.

“I know what a fucking corset is.” He snaps. “But what is… all this?”

“That is the kind of outfit you wear on a date when you want to bring a man to his knees for you.” Rhea explains, adjusting the pendant that hangs around my neck. I know the corset is pushing up my tits, drawing attention to the thin red line left by Slick’s knife. But it’s not the scar that Moose is looking at—it’s the strings that lace the sides of the top.

It takes a minute, but he seems to realize he was staring, because he clears his throat as his eyes snap to Eli's. "Boudreaux will kill you."

"Oh, I won't be fucking *him*." I laugh at Eli, though he has eyes that could probably melt the devil's cold heart. "So, *Boudreaux* doesn't have to know."

"It's not going to happen, Claire." Moose says tersely. "Go fucking change before I change you myself."

Somebody must have turned the heat up, because that makes me instantly warm. "You don't get to tell me how to dress." I laugh, covering up the fact that I nearly choked on those words. "You don't have any say over me."

"I work for someone who does." Moose shakes his head. "And I'm not letting you go out dressed like you're inviting the whole fucking fraternity to come take turns on you."

"Moose!" Rhea gasps, at the same time Eli shakes his head, looking like he'd like to slip into the floorboards. But the words don't hurt me, even though I'm certain that is what he wanted them to do. He wanted me to get mad at the insinuation so that I'd stalk off and change into something less conspicuous. He wants me to fight him on this, and as much as I want to fight him, I also want to win.

"You think I'm a whore, Moose?" My whisper is thick as I reach for the phone tucked away in my jeans pocket. "You think I'm *his* whore, don't you?" He doesn't say anything, his teeth clamped together and his jaw rigid. "You probably saw my little video, hmm?" I close the distance between us, noticing the way his eyes dip to my chest, to the scar. He definitely fucking saw that video. And he thinks Remington Boudreaux bought me. He thinks he *owns* me.

I haven't been able to decide what kind of guy Moose is in these last few months. He acts like an asshole, like he can't stand me, like he wants to be anywhere else. And he also lets his gaze linger. I didn't know what sort of man Moose was, but suddenly, I do.

"You like pretty things, huh? Is that why you work for Remy? Because he pays you enough to buy all the pretty things you want?"

Moose laughs, but he doesn't deny any of the insinuations I've made. He doesn't have to. I'll let Remy do it for him.

The phone is already ringing through the speakerphone before he even realizes what I'm doing, and there's a moment of confusion while he tries to figure out my play. I haven't talked to Remy since the day I left Costa Rica,

and I'd love to continue to ice him out, but the look on Moose's face when realization hits makes it worthwhile.

Remy answers on the second ring, his voice choked by confusion or panic or the girl he's got his dick in. "Claire?" I close my eyes, trying not to let myself imagine the scenario at the other end of the line. "What is it? Is everything okay?"

"Of course, everything is okay." I laugh, hoping it will cover the doubts that came rushing through me the minute I heard his voice. "Why wouldn't it be?"

Rhea watches me curiously as I slip out of Moose's reach and he seethes, looking ready to knock the phone from my hand and the head from my shoulders. Remy doesn't offer an answer, so I press on. "I was just wondering something, and I hoped you could help me out by answering it for me."

The silence is so thick I think it may smother me, but it lets me hear the wild pounding of my heart. "Anything." He says after a moment. I try to imagine him on the other side of the world. Is he lying in bed with another woman? Is he on his boat replacing the memories of me with another girl who was so eager for him to get her out of her clothes? Is he wrapping his arms around the throat of another, trying to claim them?

The thoughts make me angry, so I don't know why I entertain them, but I can't get them out of my head until he asks, "What do you need?"

"I was having a little bit of a dispute with my bodyguard," I chuckle, because it still sounds so ridiculous to say that out loud. "You see, he seems to think that you *own* me."

Rhea clamps her hand to her mouth to avoid her loud laugh from spilling into the silence, which is tense as Moose stares daggers at me.

It takes a minute before Remy answers.

"That's not a question, Claire."

"Fine. You see, my bodyguard seems to have seen my body before. Or my tits, at least, judging by the way he looks at them."

When Remy says nothing and Moose shakes his head at me, promising me that he's going to get me back for that, I decide to cut to the chase. "Moose has seen the video of my auction, and he is under the impression that you bought me. That you own me. But that's not true, right, Remington?" I've never called him by his full name before, but it feels good as it slips off my tongue.

The power is definitely doing something to me, making desire pool between my legs the way it did when I taunted Wes with the knife.

There's a long silence where I don't even bother wondering what Remy is doing, and then he says. "Right."

"I'm not your whore?" I prompt, waiting for the stiff, "no" he gives in response. "You don't own me." I say, confirming the words for both Remy and Moose. "So, I'm free to fuck whoever I want?"

"Claire…"

"Remy," I sigh his name like a petulant child. "I just need you to clear this up for him. See, I *thought* I knew the answer. I *thought* when I came home, that anything between us was gone and I was free to do whatever I wanted. I *thought* that was the whole fucking reason you didn't let them sell me into sex slavery to begin with."

"Jesus, Claire," he growls, growing exasperated with my questioning. "Are you serious?"

"Of course I'm serious. See, tonight I'm going on a date and if it goes well, I may just want to go back to his apartment. But even if I don't, I need to make sure Moose isn't cockblocking me because he thinks it's your command… unless it *was* your command."

"I don't own you." He says, and I wonder if I'm imagining the reluctance in his voice. "You can do whatever you want."

"So, if I want to let the whole fraternity take turns on me…" I think those are the words Moose used, and judging by the raise of his eyebrow as he stares back at me, I'm guessing I'm right. "Then I can?"

"What the hell are you doing, Claire?" Remy sighs. "Have you been drinking?"

"Not yet," I laugh. "But I will be. And if I get drunk enough and decide I want to… oh, I don't know, fuck Moose or something…" I let the words hang taut in the air, daring anyone to refute me. "I can, because my body fucking belongs to *me*, right? I get to choose what I do with it?"

It's probably a good thing I'll never have to see him again, because I'm pretty sure he'd strangle me the next time he sees me for acting like this. Lucky for me, he's in Costa Rica, and I am here. If I'm going to move on and have the life that I want, he is either going to have to be okay with watching from the wings, or he's going to have to give up this illusion he has of control.

I expect him to give me more silence, to call me a brat, to give me the venom I've been giving him. But Remy does none of that. His voice is calm when he says, "I don't know, Claire. You tell me. When you make yourself come, I know it's my name on your lips. So maybe I *do* own you… or maybe I just own the best parts of you."

It's me who is silent now, trying to decide whether he's bluffing. But the smirk on Moose's lips tells me he isn't. Remy didn't just *guess* that my orgasms are still his.

He fucking knew it.

"I have to go." Remy hangs up the phone before I can even get my brain to process what just happened.

Across from me, Moose's smug grin turns to laughter at the look on my face. "What's the matter, princess?" He teases. "Earlier, you seemed excited by the idea that I had seen your videos. Now you don't like that?"

"You put a *camera* in my room?" I glare at him.

Dimitri had warned me about the possibility of being spied upon, but I didn't expect it to be by my fucking bodyguard or his puppet master. I also didn't expect to not *hate* the idea that they could have seen any of what I do when I'm alone.

Moose shrugs, like he didn't just admit to a violation of privacy. My cheeks are so red, I decide to lose the jeans that are only making me warmer. I turn and strut back to my room, not bothering to close the door behind me as Moose follows.

"You'll never find it!" He calls out, taunting me.

But it's not the camera I'm looking for. That can wait for another time. I strip the jeans down my legs without even the slightest hesitation, not bothering to turn back and see Moose slowly approaching my doorframe. I don't bother trying to hide my ass from view as I bend over to the bottom drawer and dig out a pair of the shortest white shorts I own. I may not know where the camera is, but I can feel Moose's eyes on my ass, left visible by the thin straps of the G string I put on to help me channel my inner sex appeal. I'd say it's working, based on the way Moose groans.

My eyes make it to his just before he turns away and they're heavy with something I can't place.

"Hey Moose," I call, waiting for him to turn back around. He doesn't, but he tips his head a little, like he's afraid to face me fully. It makes me laugh, but I tamp it down.

“Monroe?”

“I need you.” I say innocently enough that it prompts him to turn back toward me. He doesn’t dare step a toe over the threshold of my door, as though he’s scared. But I’ve spent months with this man, and I don’t think anything scares him. More likely, he’s following orders.

“What?” He demands, his eyes scanning me in as I secure the button on my shorts.

“Come here,” I beckon him into the room, and he hesitates just a minute before granting my request, coming to stand right in front of me.

“What do you want, Monroe? Want me to tell you what a pretty little slut you look like?” He’s close enough that I can feel the heat radiating off of him, and part of me wants to throw caution to the wind and throw myself at him. But I can’t bear the thought of him rejecting me, as he most certainly would. And I really can’t bear the idea of Remy witnessing it on a camera somewhere. The thickening of his voice tells me that he doesn’t actually think I’m a slut—or if he does, he likes sluts.

“No.” I laugh, pushing away from him so that I can present him with my ass, stretching the fabric of my shorts. “Can you see my thong through this?”

“Nope.” Moose says quickly, and I’m sure he’s telling the truth considering that it’s a pale blue, light enough to disappear when it’s not the only thing against my fair skin. Since I didn’t need a bra in this top, I chose those over a lingerie set, and now something about knowing how little clothing stands between me and whoever I decide to let unwrap me is exhilarating.

“Thanks.” I flash him a grin, but I don’t miss the swelling of his cock as it nudges into me when I pass him. God, he’s so warm… and so big. Something deep inside of me stirs, and I guess it’s the lust that’s driving me more than anything, because I swear, I feel myself going wet under his gaze.

“You are playing a dangerous game, Monroe.” He warns, just before moving aside to let me pass.

So what? I’m being a tease, big fucking deal. I wasn’t a fucking tease when Eric Giante crawled into my bed to peel my sweatpants off of my shaking legs, and I wasn’t being a tease in the backseat of the car when Jovich sold me out to a couple of filthy pimps. If I’ve learned anything, it’s that I can dress like a preacher’s daughter or like the whores he fucks when

his wife isn’t around. Neither of them will stop a man who’s already set his mind on possessing the flesh beneath them. At least this way, I get to have a little fun with it.

“I like danger.” I tell him, tilting my head back to be able to see all of him. “I actually find it quite addictive.”

“Mmm.” He agrees. “Danger is so intoxicating, isn’t it, princess?” He grazes a knuckle down my throat, stilling my breath, my whole fucking world. “But careful you don’t lose yourself to the high.”

I want to laugh, but this time, I keep it in. “I’m not scared of losing myself, Moose. It’s been twenty-one years and I’m just now learning who I am.” He doesn’t try to say anything more to stop me, but I pause when I reach the hall and look back at him anyway. “Have fun tonight. I know I will.”

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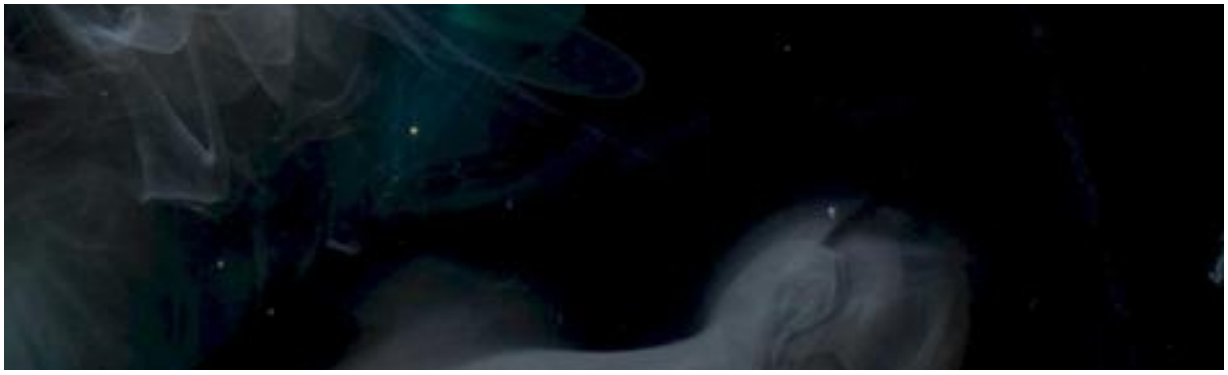

Elaine stares at me with her mouth open in shock, anger in her eyes. She looks absolutely scandalized as I hang up on Claire and slide the phone out of the way so that I can ignore the impulse to open the camera app and see her. I can imagine her, though, tearing through her room and looking for the hidden camera, her cheeks red with the heat of her anger and embarrassment. It's so damn delicious that I want to kick my housekeeper out and fist myself to the reminder of Claire's warm body and hot mouth. But Elaine wants to tell me why she's been so weird lately, and I know somehow it has to do with Davos' castle—the place we're raiding tomorrow. As much as I don't want to push my thoughts of her aside, Claire can wait.

"What is it, Elaine?" I demand. "No more distractions. We're alone." I remind her of that by gesturing around the study, showing her that our only company is in the form of words on a page. Words are great company when you need them, but they're not a threat to whatever secret she wants to relay to me. Elaine must agree, because after she glances around, she lets go of a small breath.

"When I was young, I didn't have many prospects for the future. College wasn't for me, and I didn't like the idea of finding a man to settle down with to *take care of me*," she wrinkles her nose in a show of disgust that matches her words. "So, I started cleaning houses. I worked on references, taking the biggest houses I could because more work meant more money. Eventually, I started to have people reach out to me… doctor's wives who

were too busy with Pilates and Yoga to keep their house running, or some investors' wife that didn't have the energy to clean up after her two point five kids all day."

I nod, hopefully encouraging her to get to the damn point. As much as I care about her and would be happy to listen to her life story, this isn't the time that I want to do that. I have business to attend to, and my mind is already running back to thoughts of Claire.

I'm not worried, given that her bodyguards have been thoroughly briefed on what will happen to them if anyone touches her, but my blood is boiling at thoughts of her unfurled beneath another.

Elaine must sense she's losing my interest, because the next words rush out of her mouth quickly. "I took on a job for a Senator one day. His wife had just passed away and his son was away with the military, but he had a daughter that still lived at home. He needed help with little things—meals, general housekeeping."

"What you do for me." I confirm that I'm following her so far, even though I have no fucking clue how this is relevant.

"Yes. Except, I was still early in my career, and I was so easily intimidated. I was young." She bites her lip. "But I always had a bad feeling about that guy. I never knew what it was until after his son—who had taken a leave to attend his mother's funeral—went back out of the country. He'd been gone for a few weeks when the senator hosted a party. One that he told me he didn't want me around during. But his daughter—Ally—she was sick with the flu, and I felt so bad for her. She was crying that she just wanted her mother, and I mean, she was sixteen, not like this was a child. I mean, she *was* a child." Elaine stammers. "But she was really not well, and I didn't know what to do. She had a friend over with her, a friend who practically lived with them, and the friend—Lauren—she was trying to make everything better, but nothing was helping. So, I brought her soup."

"Dastardly." I say with false accusation, because Elaine looks so guilty over taking a sick girl soup that I can't meet it with anything other than sarcasm. But she doesn't rise to my bait, stuck in whatever horror she's constructed for herself.

"The senator was having a party, and I'd been warned to stay away. I was in the house even though I wasn't supposed to be, and that's how I ended up seeing Lauren for the first time in weeks… the first time since her boyfriend left. She was dating Ally's brother, you see. She was a regular in their

house, and even though I didn’t talk to her much, I remember her face… she had an angel’s face.”

I can sense now that something bad must have happened that night, so I’ve abandoned my sarcasm and simply nod to let her know I’m listening. “I took the soup up to Ally while she was in the restroom, and I figured maybe she’d caught the same thing. She was in there so long, and I could hear splashing, crying… like she was throwing up.” Elaine sighs. “And when I asked if she needed anything, she opened the door with a dry face and smiled and told me everything was fine. But I saw the pregnancy test on the counter behind her. I wasn’t close enough to read the results, but I’m sure she was pregnant.”

“She said she was fine, and Ally fell asleep, and I wasn’t supposed to be there, so I left. I never saw Lauren again.”

I blink, trying to process the abrupt end to that random story. “You think she was… what, taken by Davos to be used as a sex slave just because you never saw her again after you heard her throwing up?” I try not to laugh, but that is quite a leap. It makes sense, with her apparently guilty conscience, that our earlier conversation made her think of a repressed memory. And as pervasive as human trade is, it’s not impossible that that really *is* what happened to her. But there are a million other possibilities for why a young, possibly pregnant girl may have disappeared.

“No.” Elaine drums her fingers against her mouth like she’s working through something in her head.

“How much do you know about this girl? I mean, she could have been scared to have a baby so she got an abortion and then couldn’t face up to it. She could have decided to run off and start a life in another state. Maybe her parents sent her away so she wouldn’t bring shame to them or something with her pregnancy.”

“No. She didn’t have parents. She was an orphan herself, raised by an aunt that worked for them before me. When her aunt died, she became a ward of the state or something. Ally was worried from the jump that something had happened to her—she didn’t answer any of her calls, she never sent her an e-mail or left her a note. She didn’t send her boyfriend any kind of letter. He found out she was missing from talking to his sister. I don’t know what ever happened to the investigation, because just a week after that party, the senator pinned me against his counter and tried to…” She clears her throat, letting me use my imagination. “He tried to coerce me

into things that weren't in my job description. I got away because Ally walked in, but if she hadn't…"

She shudders, and anger unfurls in the pit of my stomach at the idea of another woman I care for being victimized.

"I never went back, but a gracious friend put in a recommendation with your mother, and when she called me, I started working for your family. I recognized your father's driver from the night I wasn't supposed to be there, and I knew from that moment that your family was wrapped up in something cruel. But I needed the work, and no one ever bothered me, so I stayed in blissful ignorance all this time. I never thought about Lauren again until six months ago." Her voice breaks on a sob, and I watch as she tries to shove it back inside by clamping her hand over her mouth.

I blink, waiting for her story to make sense. But it doesn't. None of it makes sense… until Elaine taps on the phone she's been clutching for dear life. The screen comes alive, and she stares at it with heartbreak in her eyes for a moment before she slides it across the desk to me.

My eyes rove the photo, taking it in all at once. It's a yearbook photo, a grid of pictures not unlike the ones sitting on my kitchen counter right now with numbers beneath the pictures. This one doesn't have numbers, though. It has names on the left of the page… names that I can see despite the zoomed in photo of the girl who disappeared that night.

Lauren Marshall.

I know that's who it is because she's the first photo on the page, her name the first one on the top of the list. But I'd have known what Elaine was getting at even if she hadn't already told me the girl's name. It's impossible to miss.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say I'm looking at a photo of Claire Monroe.

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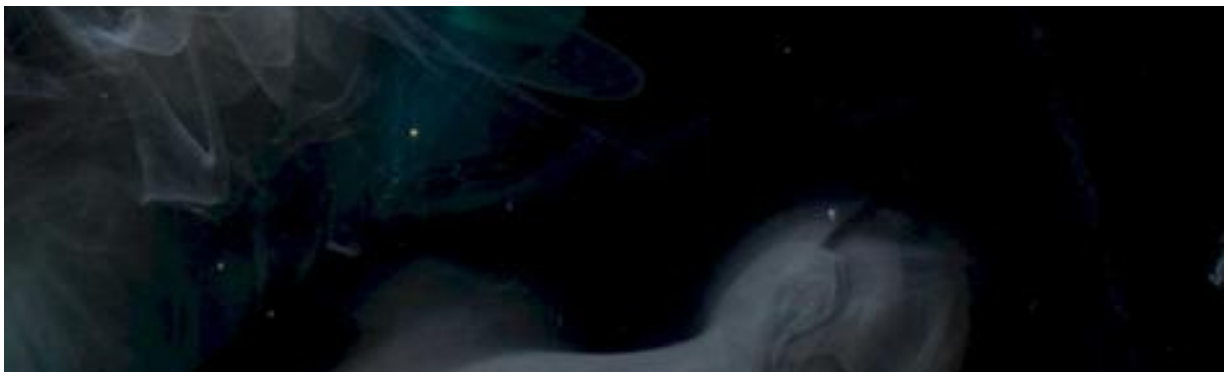

Eli looks like he'd much rather be back at my apartment fucking Rhea, but he was at least nice enough to take one for the team. I'll have to tell her to reward him extra generously tonight, because he is gloriously discreet as he moves around the room, never letting me completely out of his sight, but also never crowding me out of my own skin.

I've been out all night, and I made good on my promise to Remy to drink. I've drank a lot… enough to warm my veins as much as they can be without physical touch. We tailgated but thankfully didn't stick around to watch the game. That, we're doing on a big screen set up on the side of the house with a projector pointed at it and surround sound blasting out the commentator's remarks. It's a nice setup, particularly because I'm on Austin's shoulders in the pool, wearing nothing but the strings that hardly pass as panties and his button-down. I'm pretty sure the water floating around it has pushed the top out enough to offer a view of my ass to anyone looking up from the bottom of the pool, but I'm still somehow one of the most clothed girls here.

Rhea and I loved parties like this our freshman and sophomore year. It was outside of my comfort zone at first, but when I'd realized my life was actually kind of stable for the first time, I started to enjoy the chaos of a good party. When I dated a loser with an inferiority complex, I'd stopped coming to stuff like this, and Rhea realized she didn't need a party to find someone willing to hook up with her.

Maybe it's the drinks talking or the water that always seems to calm me, but I actually feel at peace in the middle of this chaos, pretending like I

have any idea what's happening on the screen and high fiving everyone in the immediate vicinity when something good happens. It's why, when Austin grabs my thigh to demand my attention so he can tell me he's going to get us some more drinks, I don't even bother getting out of the pool. I sit on its edge with my legs dangling and maintain the conversation I've been having with a girl named Jess who is telling me all about her Physics professor. I feel stupid in her presence as she talks about laws of the universe and how she's dying to graduate so that she can fuck her professor without anyone giving her shit for it.

"What about you, Claire?" She smiles brightly. "You going to hook up with any of your professors after graduation?"

"No," I laugh. I'm not in a position to judge any of her kinks given what I've done, but I also have no interest in any of my professors like that. Maybe I would have at one point, but not now. I can't imagine that hooking up with anyone will satisfy the need I feel, but I'm not opposed to trying. That's why, when Austin comes back with two drinks and leans down to ask if I want to go dry off in his room, I don't object. I've had him between my legs all night, and as I chug more of the latest concoction he brought me, I'm certain I want more than just his neck there.

The inside of the house is somehow louder than the outside. People crowd every bit of surface area the place has to offer. There's a game of beer pong in the dining room, flip cup in the kitchen, and a keg stand happening on the stairs, which looks both sketchy and fun as we pass them on our way up. Nobody says anything about the water dripping from my hair and the flannel as I let Austin pull me with him.

It's so loud I can't even hear my laughter over the other laughs, the cries and cheers, the sound of the game blaring outside and echoing through the open windows, and the music thumping downstairs. Thankfully, the further up the stairs we get, the more I can hear myself think. Or, the more I would be able to, if I was thinking.

I'm not, though. Tonight, I'm not thinking. I'm *doing*.

When we get to the second floor, he pulls me to the left, into a hallway lined with doors, and down to the last one. There's a shiny silver lock fitted on the outside, and for a split second, I think that maybe this is a bad idea. I don't really know a ton about Austin. For all I know, he's going to slit my neck and stuff me with newspaper so he can keep me in his room forever. And then, as quickly as that lovely thought was born, I laugh it off.

Of course they have locks on the outside of their doors. Frat houses are just like small dorms that smell more of corn chips and beer.

As he punches the code into the keypad, he doesn't shift to hide it from view, and I make out the sequence, stashing it away in case I need it.

3167.

When Austin pulls me into his room, I kick the door shut behind me and fall into him, laughing louder as he catches me against his bare chest. I glance up at him without moving, finding him grinning down at me. "You okay?"

A shiver that only has a little to do with the cold passes through me, and I nod as he turns to open a drawer of his dresser. When he turns back, he's passing me another shirt. "That one looks great on you, but I thought you may want a dry one now."

"You know me so well," I quip, taking the top and holding it out to appraise it. It's just another button-up, but it's even softer than the one currently plastered against my skin.

"I have a spare towel somewhere." Austin says, glancing around the room like the towel will just materialize.

"It's fine." I motion with my finger for him to turn around, and he does it without complaint, turning to face the door as I strip the soaked garment off and quickly replace it with the dry one. "Almost done," I assure him as I get to the last two buttons, which seem trickier to get in place than the four ahead of it. More likely, the vodka from that last drink is hitting hard, because I'm suddenly woozy, swaying on my feet.

I give up the fight and sit on the edge of his bed. "All good," I tell him, giving him permission to join me. I didn't realize he changed out of his swim trunks when he came to get us our drinks, but I notice as he approaches me that he's wearing a dry pair of board shorts that hit right above his knee. I can see the faint outline of his cock, still nestled in wet briefs beneath them.

"Is the game over?" I ask, unable to take my eyes from him as he draws closer still, stepping right in front of me and trapping me between his knees. His stomach is all muscle and it's lined up with my face. I look up at him through my lashes, blinking to try and settle the two versions of him back into one, and then reach out to pull him with me as I fall back to his bed.

Austin's body falls over mine as he comes down with me, the both of us laughing when I squeal on impact. He catches himself before our heads can

knock together, supporting his weight with an arm braced on my side. But even with that, we are chest to chest, his mouth inches from mine, his warm body blanketing mine.

“The game is over.” He confirms, “But the night isn’t.”

“No,” I agree. “It definitely isn’t.”

The hand that’s not holding himself up traipses the side of my stomach, chasing away the fabric of his shirt in slow, gentle strokes. My eyes flutter closed at the touch, so gentle and sweet, and I feel the warmth of his mouth over mine. He doesn’t kiss me as his hand skates along my arm, pushing it over my head, and then something cold brushes against my wrist.

It takes me a minute to place the metal clank—the cuff is already closed around me by the time I turn my eyes up to look at what just happened. It takes another minute to process that the cuff is attached to his bed post, and pulling on it does nothing.

I try to ask him what he’s doing, but my tongue doesn’t feel like it moves, and words don’t seem to make it out of my mouth. I don’t know Austin well enough to be chained to his bed, but I’m not horrified by the idea. In fact, part of me gets a wicked thrill at the idea that Austin may actually be able to give me what I need.

But he doesn’t give me anything, pulling away from me instead. I can’t focus on his eyes or his words as he moves away from me. I wouldn’t have seen the door open either if it weren’t for the shadow that bounces across the room.

I try to see who he just let in to join us, or if he’s just stepping out and leaving me alone up here for some strange reason. There’s a weird phantom breath on my spine that tells me I’m in trouble now. It’s like my instincts can’t break through whatever fog has been cast on me; I can’t even shiver all the way, can’t feel the depth of just how fucked I really am… or how badly I’m about to be.

And I’m actually kind of glad for that because when he moves into view, I know I’m in deep trouble.

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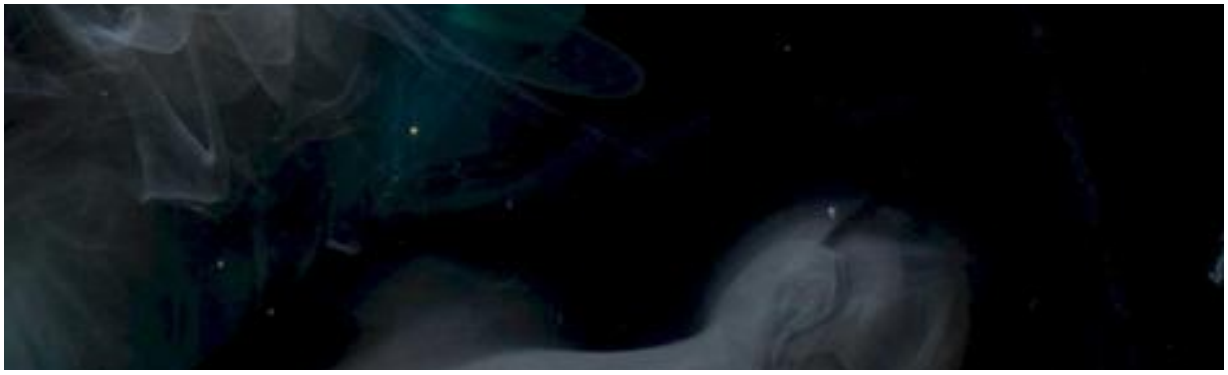

We’re gathered in my kitchen again, but this time Elaine is sitting down with the rest of us. She insisted that she could handle whatever comes, but I’m not so sure. I do know I can’t ask her to go back to prepping our dinner when she still looks like she’s going to vomit, which is why we’re all currently waiting on pizza.

I asked Elaine why she never said anything to Claire the whole time she was here, considering she clearly knew from the first moment she saw her that her mother was a missing person. But the more I think about it, the more I understand. How the fuck am I supposed to tell her that her mother may have been sold into sex slavery? There’s too many questions that aren’t answered, too many that can’t be explained away. Even if Lauren was pregnant that night of the party, how would Davos have known? Was it just a coincidence? Or did Claire’s conception happen during her mother’s captivity?

That’s not the kind of news you can drop on someone, I’m guessing. Not when Claire herself is already a victim of a failed system. Not when she’s trying so hard to move on from all of the pain and darkness that doesn’t want to release its grip on her. Telling her that she could be a product of rape would just be sending her back into darkness, a prison in her own mind. I can’t do that to her. I want to keep her as far away from this world as possible.

“This ‘menu’ is the most up-to-date list there is. Clients go in and can either ask for the menu or choose the special of the day.”

“That’s disgusting.” Dom says coldly, not needing any further explanation on what that means. After I really think about it, neither do I. I wish it had gone unanswered.

“Are we talking about… cannibalism?” Rich looks hesitantly at me, and when I don’t answer, his eyes turn to Michael, seeking clarification.

“Not in this instance.” Michael clears his throat, trying to make room for the emotion there. “In this instance, the special of the day is… well, it’s just a girl… or guy, who’s been chosen to have the most visitors. People who get overwhelmed by decisions can simply take what’s being offered.”

I watch Elaine’s nails digging into her tender skin as she clenches her hands so hard I think she may bust a knuckle. “It’s kind of like a prison in a sense that you can’t bring anything in with you. Personal belongings are checked at the door, and clients are only allowed in with the clothes on their back.”

“So, what’s the *a la car-tay* menu?” Rook asks, glancing at a paper without any photos on it. No one bothers to tell him he butchered the pronunciation, and I don’t think he’d have heard if they did because his eyes are busy scanning the paper. “Clamps, needles, stapler… what the fuck would you need a stapler for?”

Harley turns her head away, needing a quick escape from the conversation. I’d think she was going to vomit if I didn’t know she had nerves of steel. Kent, on the other hand, is as white as my crisply laundered bedsheets. “The… a la carte menu is designed to enhance the experience for the client. Candles, matches, speakers, knives and guns. They even have animals they offer.”

“Guns?” Dimitri frowns. “They let their clients shoot their prisoners?”

I’m a little stuck on the casual mention of bestiality myself, but I force myself to swallow the bile and focus on Michael, who grips the countertop as he shakes his head.

“No. If they kill them, they have to pay for them. Most people don’t want that, so the weapons are usually used for… compliance.”

“Compliance?” I laugh, though there’s really nothing funny about the situation. “As if they can get away from it.”

“Mmm.” He makes a noncommittal noise, glancing down at the paper before him, and then his eyes meet mine. “I suppose some people prefer to threaten a girl with a gun to stay silent, and others like to staple her mouth shut to ensure it.”

“Or other things.” Rich says, his arms crossed over his stomach as he leans back. He looks like he’s trying to hold himself together, and I don’t know the extent of his background, but I get the sense that he’s getting overwhelmed.

Next to him, Kent dives for the menu, his eyes furiously scanning through the photos. He’s not perusing, not looking for the best offering, not taking his time to think about all the mothers, daughters, sisters, nieces, and friends there. He’s just looking for one person… always looking for her. Nobody speaks as he looks, offering him the silence so he can focus.

When he drops the last page, the look on his face is pure relief followed by sheer agony. A sob breaks out of his chest, but we all have the decency to pretend it didn’t, except for Rich. His friend places a gentle hand on his shoulder as Kent hangs his head in his hands.

We all know he was hoping not to see her on the menu as much as he *was* hoping to see her there. Because if she was there, he’d be seeing her tomorrow… they’d be reunited finally despite whatever hell she has suffered. The fact that she’s not there means maybe she hasn’t suffered to that extent, but it also means the search goes on. It means she could be dead, or that he could live his entire life without ever knowing what happened to her.

“What’s security like?” I ask, hoping to shift the conversation away from the gory details.

Michael looks grateful for it when he glances up at me. Knowing the details is important because we’re going to storm the gates tomorrow. The devil himself probably doesn’t know the extent of exactly what we’re about to witness, and we need to be prepared to help in whatever way we can. I’m not so disillusioned that I think we can ease their fears simply by showing up with guns and yelling at them to get out. If we had more people on our side, more people who were trained and qualified to help in these situations, maybe the process would be seamless. But I can’t reach out for help to anyone who I haven’t personally vetted. I told Claire that even the organizations that fundraise to prevent such atrocities have blood on their hands, and I wasn’t lying. All it takes is one single person with wavering convictions or need for power, control, money. It’s easy to corrupt people, and far harder to fight it.

“It’s a sixty-acre property with an iron gate at the front. The gate is controlled by a guard in the cam-room.”

“So, he’s our first mark.”

“They.” Michael says. “There’s two of them. And it’s not just a camera room. I guess, it’s more of a control room. If we don’t take them out before they hit their pretty little buttons, they’ll lock the whole place down. Cells can’t be opened manually, so lock down is bad.”

“Can’t we just un-lock it down after we kill those two?” Dom asks.

“Sure… if you know the code. That’s obviously not information my insider was made aware of.”

“I’m suspicious of how your insider got all the stuff he *did* get.” I say, studying him for any hint of the answer.

“She.” Michael grins. “My insider is a she. My informant is a he. They’ve… formed a little bit of a bond. She gave him everything he needed to give to me.”

“That’s brave.” Harley says flatly. I’d think she was being sarcastic, but when I meet her eyes, they’re trained on the book of photos Kent dropped as if she’s itching to go through them.

“It is.” Michael agrees. “And I don’t even know how she got all of her information, but suffice to say, she’s been there a long time.”

“Okay,” Kent says, focused again on the task at hand, “We take out the guards in the comms room. What about the perimeter? Surely that’s not all they’ve got.”

“It’s definitely not.” Michael’s laugh is rye. “There’s four guards in the actual building. They switch off between comms room and cell patrol. Then you’ve got an additional four on the perimeter… one to guard each direction’s approach. They make a circuit though their territory every four hours, going counterclockwise with each circuit starting at the top of the next hour. They alternate breaks the same way, which means that each territory is left completely vulnerable twice a day.”

“So, eight people we have to kill?” Rook hesitates.

“Ten, actually. In addition to the eight guards, there are two ‘masters’. These are the guys who oversee the house—the ones that keep everyone in line, pull the strings, deal with the finances. They’re basically the ones running the whole operation, and they’re either going to run like the fucking cowards they are, or they’re going to go to any lengths to try and stop us from dismantling their empire.”

“Either way, they need eliminated.” I say.

No one disagrees.

I turn to Rich and Kent, waiting for whatever plan they're working through. I had my own plan with the Zurich property, and it didn't go accordingly. This time, I've given control to the only other person who may hate this entire operation as much as me.

"You know the insider's name?" Kent asks, glancing at Michael.

"No names." He sighs. "But I know her number. 4152."

"So, if we can get someone on the inside… or multiple someone's on the inside… we can use their own weapons against them."

"Their own weapons?" Harley asks. "I think the worst weapons they have there are their dicks, and I *really* hope you don't mean that."

"No." Kent shakes his head, brandishing the piece of paper Rook dropped earlier. "The a la carte menu."

"You want to use the knives and guns they use on the captives to take over the comms room?" Dimitri sounds aghast, speaking for the first time in what feels like hours.

"If we can't get our own weapons into the prison to start, then we have to use what's inside." Rich reasons, crossing his thick arms over his chest. "It's not a matter of what we want to do. I want to bomb the fuckers like rats, but obviously we can't do that until the captives are safe."

Kent finds my eyes and nods his agreement.

The thought of sending him into the snake pit to choose a woman and a weapon they think he'll use against her makes me feel some way I can't even describe, but it's not a bad idea. "You think that could really work?"

"You're going to take down a brothel with a fucking staple gun?" Dom huffs, clearly not as confident as I am that this could work.

"It's probably the *only* way it works." Kent reasons. "Send in two at the start and choose a weapon. The guns may not even be loaded… they could be for show. In that case, the knife would be a better option. They probably don't give you the item to walk around with, so the window of opportunity will be narrow. Do they take you to their cell or…?"

"Rooms can be rented by the hour, in addition to the… rest of it."

Kent nods. "Rent a room, then. They'll have to deliver the weapon and the girl. That gives you an opening to study the place along the way, and when we take out the guards, you can leave them in the room. Be sure to choose restraints from the a la carte menu, so you can restrain them if you need to. Take out the guards, dress in their clothes, and tell the girls you're taking them back to their cells. That's two guards down on the inside,

leaving the cells unguarded from the outside. We'll do this right before trade-off. The comms room guards will open the door to come out. We wait for them to get completely out of the room. They won't be expecting anyone else, so they won't be looking for our faces. Hopefully by the time they realize, we're driving the blade across their throats. Drag them into the room, make sure they're dead, and open the gates while North patrol isn't on his circuit. It will take some time for the security to assemble, and when they do, they'll be calling everyone and anyone they can think of for backup. We don't know what that will look like, but at this point, the Masters will probably figure it out, if they haven't already."

"From there, it's just a good old-fashioned raid." Rich says. "Kill all the fuckers and save as many of the captives as you can."

"Can your pilot land in the middle of the field?"

"He can," I nod, confident that Simon can land the plane anywhere. "But how many people are in there?"

"Something like sixty." Michael chews on his lip, knowing exactly what I'm getting at. There's only so much space on the jet. It barely holds all of us, let alone a bunch of traumatized and brutalized captives.

"Fuck." I growl, slamming my fist into the table and watching the papers leap. Next to me, Harley doesn't so much as blink.

"So, we re-adjust the plan," Kent says easily. "You know anyone else with a private jet?"

That makes me laugh, and Dimitri joins in. "Plenty of people." Dimitri answers for me. "None of which are on our side."

"What about a chopper?" Rook shrugs. "I know a guy."

"A chopper would fit even less people than the jet." Dom rolls his eyes.

"Not a military one." Rook snaps back.

"Unless Kent or Rich can commandeer a military helicopter overnight, I'm pretty sure that's not an option."

"Not likely," Kent laughs. "Given that the army and I didn't part under the best of terms."

Rich just shakes his head, confirming what I figured. How the hell would we get our hands on military property when we're a rogue team, none of us with active military connections in any country?

When Elaine speaks, I nearly jump. I've been so deep into trying to figure out how to evacuate sixty refugees to a safe place that I pretty much forgot she was still in the room. But she hasn't left—not physically or mentally.

“Actually, I think I know a guy.”

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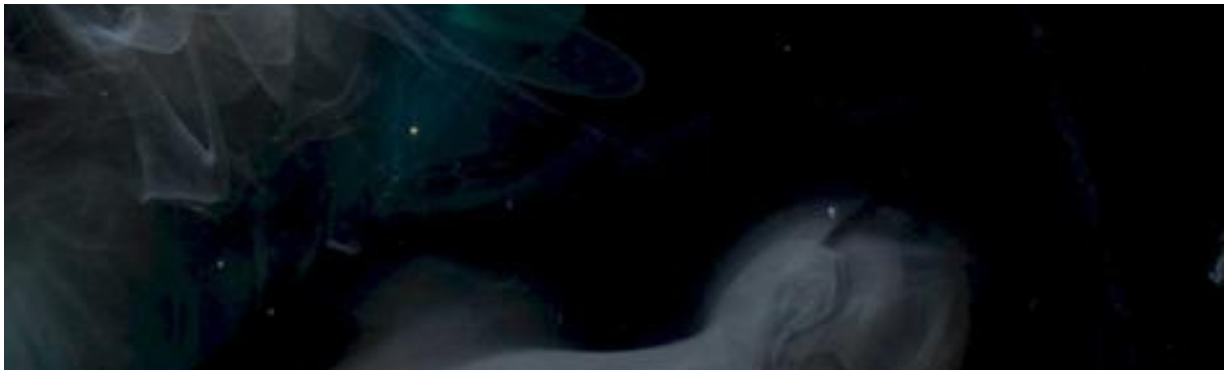

“You!” I slur, the accusation weighing more than my burdened tongue can tolerate. I blink at him a few times, until he settles into a single man with the most beautifully wicked smirk I’ve ever seen.

“Look at the mess you’ve gotten yourself into, Monroe.” He tuts his tongue at me, pacing back and forth beside me. I think he does it because he knows I can’t follow him all the way, and he enjoys torturing me as he fades out of view and then suddenly reappears. “So desperate for a little attention that you’ve gotten yourself chained to the bed of a pathetic frat bro.”

“I’m not… desperate.”

It’s a lie, of course. I am desperate. That’s painfully obvious as he climbs over me, swinging one leg over my waist and settling on my stomach. I feel myself clenching, begging for him to slide lower and meet me where I want him. I hate him, but I want him so much it scares me. “Don’t lie to me, princess.” Moose chuckles, his fingers traipsing along my skin as he traces a path up my stomach, pushing Austin’s shirt higher up my torso until it’s bunched up just below my breasts, leaving the long expanse of my stomach bared to him.

When Moose’s fingers leave my skin, I whimper. But they don’t go far, running over the soft material of the shirt and straight up my chest to my neck, his thumb dusting my throat and falling upon my lips. “You’re desperate for something, princess. I just can’t figure out what it is. I can’t figure *you* out.”

I don’t think I can speak with his finger tracing my lips, so I don’t even bother trying, watching him as I wait to see where he’s going to take things. I teased him before I left the house, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s coming to take what I didn’t expressly offer. Moose looks like the sort of man who is used to taking what he wants. But that thought doesn’t scare me. I want him to take what I’m not willing to give him. I want him to take my pride, to take my body and make it feel something other than this fucking misery I’ve lived with for the last few months.

I’ve caged myself in the skin of an innocent, putting on my best show to try and act like my life will ever be anything different than what it is under the surface. But I’m tired of trying with nothing to show for it. I’m tired of suffocating the fire inside of me so that I can pretend to be someone I’m not. Right now, Moose can feed my fire, give me what I need to burn. And I want him to.

As his thumb leaves my lips and skates along my jaw, I seize the opportunity to speak. “I don’t need to be understood. I need to be felt.”

His eyes darken at my words, like that’s an enticing promise. But I already know the promise is enticing. As much as he seems to hate me, Moose also seems to love fucking around with my head. Even if he isn’t sexually attracted to me, he wants to fuck me because he knows it will get him inside my head.

“There’s one thing I think I do know about you…” He says, his fingers slipping down to the top button of Austin’s shirt.

I suck in an eager breath, arching my back to make it easier on him, bringing the buttons closer to him. But he doesn’t free it, instead running his thumb in circles around the small thing. My eyes focus on his motions, so slow and easy, before they snap back to his eyes. I’m definitely wetter than I was before, and the look in his eyes tells me he’s fully aware of that despite the fact he isn’t touching me anywhere.

I can feel his cock though, pressed into my stomach. That makes no lies, no excuses or apologies as it seeks me of its own accord. He wants this as much as I do.

“What?” I gasp as he adjusts himself over me a little, the faintest brush of his jeans against my inner thigh.

He grins, amused with the effect he has on me. “No matter how much you may try to tell yourself otherwise,” His breath on my neck has my toes

curling, and I close my eyes in anticipation. “You’re not the kind of girl who has casual sex.”

“You just told me you can’t figure me out.” I snap. “So, what makes you think you know I’m not into casual sex? I’d very much like for you to fuck me right now and I promise you, Moose, I don’t even like you.”

“The feeling is mutual, princess.” Moose laughs, freeing the top button of the shirt finally. He doesn’t tell me which feeling is mutual, but he doesn’t have to. It’s probably both of them, but only one of them is evident right now.

“I’ve heard hate sex is fun.” I say, watching as he undoes the second button without taking his eyes from mine. I watch the way his lip curls, amused at my suggestion, and I don’t take my eyes from him as he slips the third or fourth one free either. It’s as his palm skates across my now-exposed stomach that I break the connection, relaxing my head back onto the pillow and eagerly awaiting whatever he’s going to give me.

“Quite the pillow princess, I see.” He laughs. “You’re taking it literally.”

He’s trying to offend me with that, but I don’t think anything would offend me right now. He could probably slap me, and I’d say thank you because the touch would at least feed the fire dying to break free. “There are other uses for your mouth, Moose.” I tell him, my voice thick with lust as I adjust my cuffed wrist. His eyes are shining with what I’m assuming is amusement, but they darken again with my next words. “And mine.”

The little groan that comes from him is as much as I am going to get as he looks at me, my legs bared and tits barely covered by the open shirt. He could take me easily. He knows I wouldn’t fight him, and I’m laid out before him like an offering as his hand reaches up to caress my wrist, the handcuff trapping me there. “There are many things I would like to do to your mouth, princess.”

The words are whispered against my ear, and I don’t know if it’s the brush of his lips or the dirty words that makes the little whimper leave my tongue. I hear something as he fumbles with the cuff, and then the resistance disappears and my arm falls onto the bed like dead weight. “And it’s not just your mouth I would do dirty things to, Monroe. I want to do filthy things to your entire body. I want to break you because you look like you want to be broken.”

“Please.” I moan, the need between my legs growing with each new word. “I want that.”

“You want to be broken.” He laughs, pulling the shirt off of me like I’m a doll he’s been tasked with changing.

“Yes.” I plead.

“I know.” He agrees. “You want to be broken, and I want to break you.”

“So do it.” I beg. “Just fucking do it.”

He reaches for something from behind him, and I just see something black before he pulls it over my head. A blindfold? I don’t think I could fight him if I wanted to—and I don’t want to. My body feels like it’s made of lead, but his touch made me feel lighter. I want it back, but he doesn’t offer me anything more than the less than gentle scrape of his fingers as he pulls the fabric over my head, and I pop out on the other side.

A shirt, I realize, as he guides my arms into the holes without ever taking his eyes from me. They don’t stray, despite his words of having filthy ideas for what to do with my body. Instead, he covers me, tugging my shirt into place with a little bit of difficulty. “Moose,” I groan, the disappointment settling in. “What are you doing?”

He doesn’t grace me with an answer as he stands up and steps to the foot of the bed. His eyes flick to mine so that he can watch my face when he gives me a command. “Spread your legs.”

I do, just enough for him to slip my shorts onto my body and pull them in place, amused with his own wit or my disappointment that he’s not willing to take my bait. He secures the button for me and steps back to admire his handiwork. I wonder if it’s the first time he’s ever had to put a woman’s clothes on rather than take them off and feel strangely mournful. I also feel really tired.

He doesn’t bother putting on my shoes, so I don’t know if he grabbed them when he took the rest of my clothes from the side of the pool, or if he missed those. It doesn’t really matter either way, because I’m not walking out of here. He scoops me into his arms, wrapping one of mine around his neck, and tells me to hold on.

“Moose…” I say, though the word sounds strange on my tongue. He doesn’t look down at me, but I know he can hear me. “Do you hate me, too?”

I never hear what he says by way of answer. I’m not even sure the last words make it out into the air or die on my tongue, because it suddenly becomes too much, and I tuck my head into his chest, letting the darkness take me.

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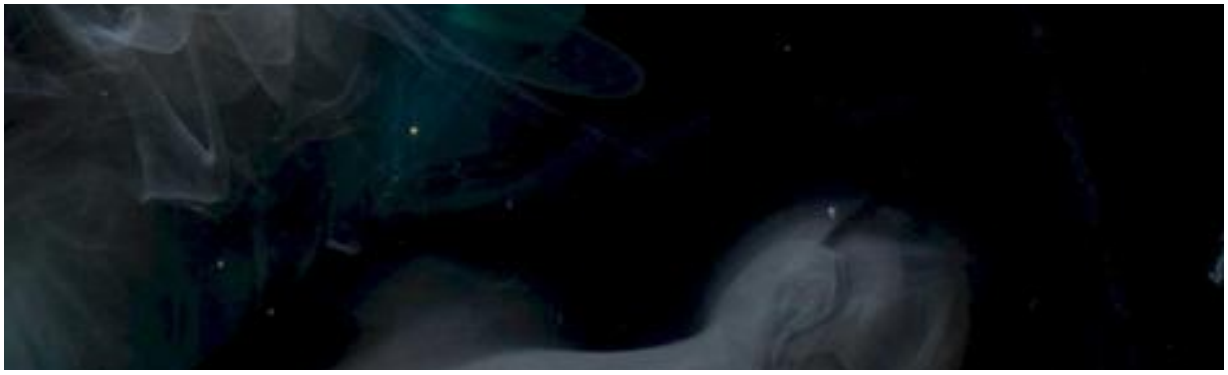

I don’t know how the hell she did it, but she fucking did it. I don’t know whether to laugh or thank her when we roll up to the airfield to see the plane ready and waiting, the door open with a set of rolling steps pushed up to it. We won’t have steps when we have to get the captives into the plane, but we will make it work.

“Where the fuck did you find a guy with a C-17?” Rich laughs, staring at my housekeeper like she’s a witch who just conjured that up out of nowhere.

It took a few days, which meant our mission had to be delayed. That wasn’t an easy decision—every day means more suffering, but it also means that everyone gets out alive. Or at least, we hope it does.

“Don’t thank me yet.” Elaine says under her breath. “You’ll see what I had to do to get this in a minute.”

The man coming down the steps is dressed in a black suit rather than any kind of military gear, and my confusion only deepens… until he looks up and flashes me a smile. “Remington!”

“Massarini.” I blink, trying to process his presence and turning to Elaine for an explanation.

“Senator.” She says pointedly, stiffly. When her eyes flicker to me, realization settles deeper.

Senator.

At my father’s wake, I remember him talking to her, her hurry to get away from him. In addition to what I learned about her work history the

other day, I can surmise that the senator must have been the person who employed her all those years ago.

"Good to see you again." I shake his hand, trying to work out the details. If this is the senator that Elaine worked for, that makes him a suspect in Lauren's disappearance all those years ago.

"Well, there's not a lot I wouldn't do for Elaine." He smiles fondly at her. "Besides, she told me you have something to tell me?"

"We do." Elaine nods. "And it's important."

I blink, shifting my eyes to the plane behind him. "You were able to accrue a military plane in a few days' notice just because your former housekeeper *asked* you to?"

That makes him laugh a little. "Once a marine, always a marine. But I've got friends in high places." He shrugs. "She said it was a matter of *extreme* importance. Besides, Remington, our fathers were friends for years. They may be gone now, but I think it's still important to honor those relationships."

"Victor—" A shrill voice from the top of the stairs draws his attention away from me long enough for me to glare accusingly at Elaine.

"Excuse me," Victor smiles warmly at us before turning to jog up the steps toward the woman demanding his attention.

"You could have just fucked our entire mission, Elaine!" I hiss, searching her face to try and figure out what exactly she is thinking by bringing a stranger into the fold. Having the plane he procured for us is great, but if it lets the enemy know that we're onto them, it's useless.

"Maybe I did." She says, wringing her hands together nervously. "But I think we can trust him."

"Trust him?" I almost laugh. "When you told me about Lauren," I say her name in the quietest whisper, though I don't think the senator is focused on us at all. "You made it sounds like he was part of the problem."

"No." Elaine shakes her head swiftly. "He may have had something to do with it, but I don't know. I don't think so."

"You don't *think* so? Jesus, Elaine, you gambled sixty lives because you don't *think* he's a bad guy, but you don't know for sure?"

"No," she licks her lips. "I don't think he's a bad guy. I think he's Claire's father."

Her words take a minute to process, and I don't get a chance to react to them because he's headed back to us with the woman at his side now and a

smile on his handsome face. “Remington, this is my wife, Addison.”

“Nice to meet you, Addison.” I say, holding out a hand as I assess the woman before me with her deep red hair swept back into a clip that glints in the sunlight. She takes my hand with a cold smile, her blood-red nails shaped like talons matching the shade of her lips. She looks like a vampire, and it does little to quell my suspicions of the senator.

“Addison?” Elaine says slowly, looking at the woman like she recognizes her. Probably from childhood nightmares since she looks like she’d carve your heart out with those wicked nails and eat it for breakfast.

“Yes.” Addison says, her cold eyes glancing over Elaine like she’s expecting something more. But whatever it is, nothing comes of it. She looks away before Elaine can say anything, and the senator misses the chance to introduce them when she asks him something I don’t hear.

“Is there anything I can do for you, Senator? In return for this generous favor, I mean.”

“You can explain.” The senator laughs. “I mean, strictly speaking, what we’re doing isn’t legal. Of course, I’ll figure it out when we get there, and we’ll have to delete the flight logs to stay off the radar, literally and metaphorically,” he laughs at his own joke. “But if you guys are willing to tell me what this is all about up front, I sure would appreciate it.”

“You’re… coming?”

“Of course.” Victor laughs, showcasing his politician’s smile. “It was described as a matter of extreme importance.”

“And extreme boredom.” Elaine laughs suddenly. “It’s not the sort of flight an esteemed woman such as your wife wants to take. I’m sure you’re exhausted from the trip here.” Her voice is simpering, catering to the senator’s wife. And it appears to work, whatever Elaine is up to, because Addison sighs.

“Painfully so. I haven’t slept much since Mason was born, and it only got worse after Brantley.”

“Two boys?” Elaine asks. “Oh, you poor thing. I can’t even imagine your fatigue.” She tuts her tongue like she is thinking of something. “Why don’t you come relax at the house with me? We can leave the men to their manly business, and I’ll treat you to a wonderful dinner. And we have some of the best spa treatments in the world, right here at our disposal.”

Addison glances at her nails, thinking that offer through, and then turns to her husband. “I do need the rest, you know. It’s the whole reason I came

along.”

“Of course,” he agrees quickly. I’m not sure yet whether the senator is a man used to agreeing with everybody or if his wife has just trained him well, but either way, he seems eager to please.

“Make yourself at home,” I say with a smile, taking Elaine’s lead.

“Thank you.” Addison says, and I have no doubt that she absolutely will.

The senator and his wife kiss goodbye, and then Elaine ushers her to the car we brought to the airfield. She even shepherds the woman to her door like a chauffeur, closing it behind her. Addison did an impressive job ignoring the rest of the crew, but once she’s safely inside the car, her husband turns his attention to the people he hasn’t met yet.

“I’m Victor,” he says, sticking his hand out for whoever wants to take charge and shake it first. Not surprisingly, that person is Michael. He’s just closing his hand around the senator’s when Elaine pulls me back just enough to whisper to me.

“Tell him everything. I’ll distract the wife, but lay it all out, Rem. If he’s the guy I think he is, he will help.”

I’m not so sure she’s right, but I don’t say that because she steps quickly away and slips into the driver’s seat. A moment later, the car disappears from the airfield, turning onto the paved road outside, and everyone has been introduced. I can feel the distrust coming from the crew I’ve assembled as they assess the senator with his suit, and I can feel his confusion as he assesses them, looking for their commonality, looking for mine.

“Let’s get inside,” I suggest, tipping my head toward the front of the plane. “And I’ll explain everything.”

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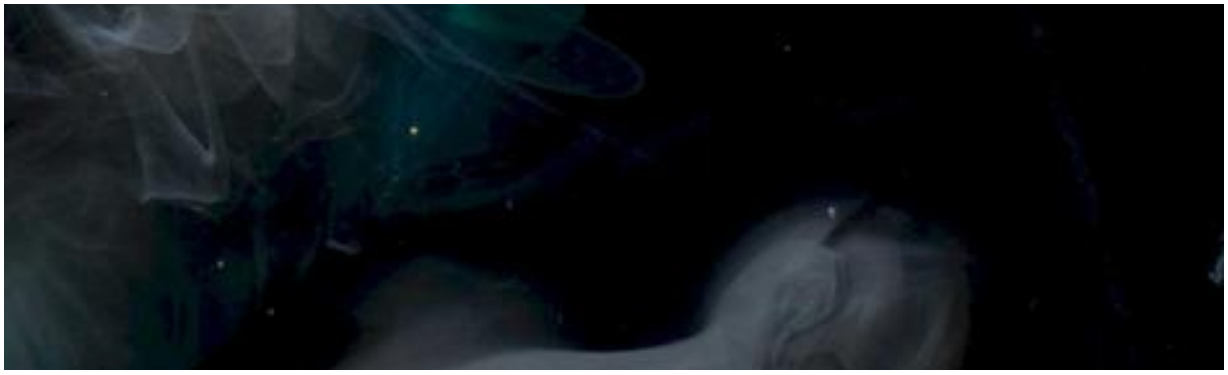

I haven’t left the apartment for a week because the thought of facing Moose makes me want to peel my skin off. He followed me on his day off, drugged my drink, and coerced Austin into handcuffing me to his bed so that my bodyguard could come prove why I need him. That’s all embarrassing of its own right, but then add to that the fact that I literally begged him to fuck me, and I could die. I might, the next time I see him.

It was the week before spring break, so classes were light as a feather. I didn’t miss anything I couldn’t take care of by logging into the student system and doing, so it has been easy to avoid him.

Of course, it doesn’t last. Rhea calls me out to the living room without any explanation, and when I enter, she presses a glass of wine into my hands. No sooner does she do that, I notice Moose standing in the corner next to the barstool with irritation written on his face. He doesn’t look at me, which I expect to be grateful for, but somehow that feels like just another rejection.

“Rhea…” I sigh, turning to go back to the comfort of my room.

In the last week, I’ve torn apart everything in my room, and I still haven’t found any sort of camera. Whether Remy and Moose really are spying on me, I can’t say, but I’m assuming they were telling the truth, so I’ve been too mortified to do anything other than read and sleep. I’ve even started changing in the bathroom, just in case their prying eyes are looking for something that neither of them has the courage to come get.

“Just, sit.” She pushes me toward the couch, and the wine in the glass nearly sloshes over the side as I fall onto it.

“You haven’t been yourself lately, Claire, and it scares me. I know what you went through last year.” She raises a hand, as if I was going to argue the point. Next to me on the couch, Eli looks confused. He’s also on my shit list, being that he let Moose intervene on my night out. As big as he is, he always balks to Moose… like a little bitch. “But that’s not what I’m talking about. I mean, since we got back home, back to school, you haven’t been acting right. And it kills me to see you suffer like that.” She shakes her head sadly. “I think it’s this place that’s doing that to you. This apartment, this campus, college.”

“Just… waiting for my life to begin.” I muster a smile.

“Exactly!” Rhea points a finger. “That’s exactly my point! You’re not living right now, you’re… floating.”

Floating feels good sometimes. Other times, your muscles ache with the need to move. I don’t bother telling her any of that, because she won’t bother listening. I also don’t tell her any of that because I’m tired of floating too.

“So, I think we need to get you out of the water… drag you onto land.”

I narrow my eyes on her, not sure where she’s going with this metaphor. “I like the water.”

“I don’t like watching you tread it.” She laughs. “Which is why we’re going to party on shore… or maybe on a boat, we’ll see what happens.”

“Rhea,” I sigh. Sometimes she’s exhausting. “What are you talking about?”

“Spring break! We’re going to spend it in Miami. I think the sun is going to do you a world of good, because you’ve been hiding away for months. You’re so pale that the tan lines you’ve had since our first summer together are gone.”

“How do you even know that?” I ask, narrowing my eyes on her.

“Maybe I told her.” Moose quips. “Or maybe you don’t remember me taking a pic for your benefactor when you were begging for me to fuck you the other night?”

The scarlet that crawls along my cheeks has to rival the wine in my glass… wine which I promptly take a big gulp from. “Moose.” Rhea chides. “Not helping.”

I don’t turn to see how he reacts to that, but I’m sure he doesn’t care. His job isn’t to help her make me feel better. “Does everyone know about that?” I mutter, wondering if I can drown myself in the two inches of wine still left in my glass. It definitely won’t do, so I grab the bottle from the coffee table and press it to my lips instead.

“Not everyone.” Moose reasons. “I haven’t told Boudreaux just yet.”

“Because he’d fire you both.” Rhea snaps. “You heard him as clearly as I did. Claire is an adult. She can sleep with whoever she wants to. You had no right to intervene… either of you.” Her eyes sweep to Eli, who looks to the floor in a way that lets me know she thoroughly punished him for his part in my celibacy that night.

“My job is to protect her *body*, not her fragile feelings.” Moose laughs, making me snap around to face him.

“Fuck you.” I grind out the words, my hatred for him rising like a tide.

“I know you want to, princess.” He winks, undisturbed by the rage flooding me.

“Your job is to keep anything bad from happening.” Rhea says, sounding almost exasperated. “Orgasms aren’t bad, okay?”

Moose snorts, and I find myself wondering how much Rhea had to drink before she called this meeting. “She can give herself as many as she wants. I think both Boudreaux and I quite enjoy when she does.”

“If you really have access to that, you’d better pretend you don’t, or I promise *Boudreaux* will slit your pretty tattooed throat, okay?” Rhea smiles sweetly at him, catching Moose off guard for just a moment. “Now, we are going on vacation. I don’t care what any of you say. I’ve rented us a house, so no weird hotel room situation.”

“And you’ve cleared this?” Eli asks, glancing over me to Moose and then back to Rhea. “With your brother?”

“My brother isn’t my keeper.” She laughs. “And neither are you. We tolerate your presence, but don’t misunderstand… you’re not going to be around forever. And I can have you replaced any time I want.”

Moose only snorts, clearly not believing her, but Eli straightens under the threat. No surprise he loves his job. He gets paid a pretty penny to fuck a beautiful woman who is, arguably, out of his league. He’s one of a rare few man who actually gets to enjoy her company over and over again, but I know that Rhea hasn’t caught feelings for him. She could have him

replaced in less than twenty-four hours, and men would probably line up for the position.

“Also, yes. I told him we were going to Miami.”

“The human trafficking capital of the south,” I say, despite the fact that it’s not the worst city possible. I’m being petulant simply because my best friend is insistent upon making me pretend that I’m just a college senior who wants to drink and party without thinking about reality.

“We’ll be fine.” Rhea assures me. “We have the guys, and besides, it’s not like lightning strikes the same place twice.”

I didn’t mention it because I was worried, although I guess she would see it that way. Miami is a hub, making travel to other places so much easier. Like Atlanta, they both connect to several other destinations. If you take a wrong turn, you could end up in a totally different country mere hours later.

It’s actually kind of perfect.

I can feel the weight of Moose’s eyes on me as he speaks. “Lightning doesn’t strike the same place twice…” he almost sounds like he’s agreeing with Rhea, until he continues. “Unless you’re a lightning rod.”

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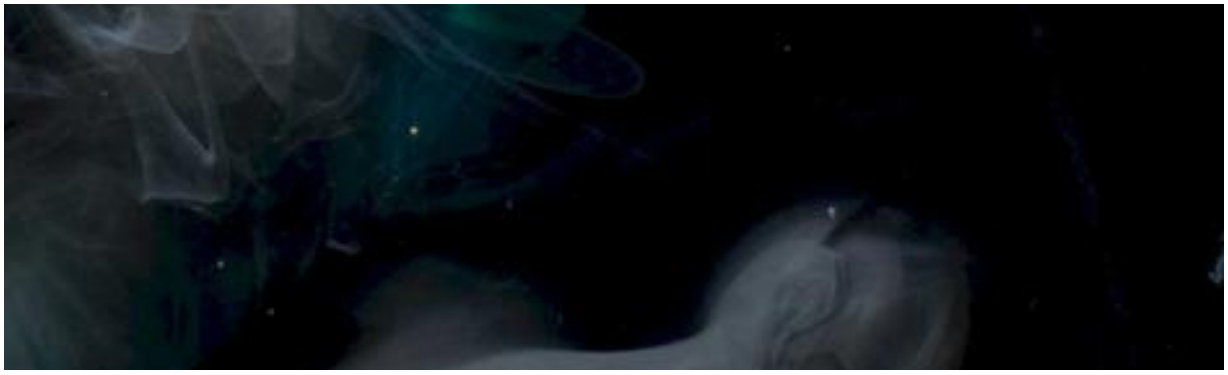

I've kind of learned there's no way to ease someone into the conversation, so I don't bother. Once I've got the senator to myself, isolated from the others at the front of the plane, I shove the menu Elaine insisted I bring into his open lap.

I watch his brow furrow with confusion as he looks at the Dutch words stamped across the file. The confusion stays as he swings it open and gets a look at the first page of photos—they could be mugshots, except they're not lined up so that their height can be recorded, though that information *is* provided under each of the photos in lieu of a name. Height, weight, and age, written as a continuous and unbroken number, using the metric system of course.

His eyes sharpen as they search for identifiers as to what he's looking at—each girl looks to be made up, hair styled perfectly and makeup applied by a steady hand, but none of them are smiling. Some even have tear tracks cutting through the powder on their cheeks.

"What is this?" He demands, turning the page to take in more, looking for anyone or anything he recognizes to help explain what he's seeing.

"A menu." I tell him honestly. "You can choose which one suits you best."

"A menu?" His eyes flicker up to mine, clouded by confusion. "I don't understand. Like… an escort service?"

I laugh drily. "Something like that, although you won't be escorting these women anywhere. Well, other than to freedom, if everything goes to plan."

His eyes narrow on me, looking for more than what I'm saying. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, there are sixty men and women waiting in cages for us to come save them. They're probably being tortured and raped as we speak."

I've decided to stop dancing around the language, too. As horrific as it is to think in terms of such violent things, it's the truth of what's happening, and calling it something more flowery is a disservice to those living through it and those who have already lived through it. It's a disservice to me, to Genevieve.

"You can't be serious." He laughs, but I don't believe the senator finds anything about the situation funny. He looks rattled, and I have no doubts that whatever he thought he was getting me a plane for, it wasn't this. "This is your idea of a joke?"

"No." I shake my head. "My ideas of jokes are a bit more… violent."

His brow furrows deeper as he tries to decode the meaning of that. "Okay." He nods. "Look, I see you took the whole 'women sold in cabinets' online thing seriously. You need to stop drinking the Kool-Aid, kid."

"I wish I was joking. Unfortunately, this is the reality for thousands of people all over the world... men and women, children. And I have reason to believe that you know someone this may have happened to."

"Me?" The senator shakes his head. "No."

He doesn't say that he was raised with a silver spoon in his mouth, that he doesn't know the sort of people that this sort of horrible stuff happens to, that trafficking is a crime that isn't sophisticated enough for someone of his caliber to have been involved in. His bias is written all over his face.

"Not all trafficking is the same. And not all victims are used for the same purpose. Some are sold to the highest bidder—Claire was."

I notice the interest in his eye at the mention of Claire, telling me he certainly didn't forget her. He's opening his mouth to say something about it, but I don't give him the chance. "Some are taken to be used for their bodies or their body parts… organs. Some are taken to be used as toys by people with demonic tastes in the bedroom… and the kitchen."

His face is white as the meaning behind my words sinks in. Cannibalism. It's probably not the fate that most people end up meeting, but Davos has given me plenty of assurance over the years that it happens. Nothing ever goes to waste for some people.

"I… What does…?"

“What does this have to do with you?” I guess. “You’re a human rights activist, aren’t you? Always trying to please the greatest amount of people with your progressive vision yet traditional values?”

I think he’d be offended if he wasn’t already so disgusted by the reality of what I’m suggesting. “What does this have to do with politics?”

“Nothing.” I shrug. “And also, everything. It’s a human rights issue. And I think it’s a personal issue for you. Or at least, it’s about to be.”

“You’re taking me to see it?” He sounds faint, like he isn’t up to the task. And I believe him. Either the senator is a great actor, or he is so horrified by the idea of what I’m telling him that he wants to run from it. I don’t blame him for that, either. I also wanted to run from it. I tried. But you can’t run from yourself, and I think Victor has realized as much already.

“I’m taking you to witness as part of the empire crumbles. And while I do it, I want to tell you a story.”

“A… a story?”

“A story.” I confirm. “About someone you seemed very interested in when you met her.”

“Claire.” The senator whispers, his eyes searching me for answers to questions his brain hasn’t even come up with yet. “I don’t understand, though.”

“You will.” I promise him.

And he does. By the time I finish telling him about how my employee dropped my sister’s best friend into the lap of the devil’s minions, I can practically see the wheels turning in his mind.

“Did you buy her?” he asks, no doubt thinking back to the night he met Claire at my father’s wake.

“I tried.” I tell him honestly. “And she wouldn’t have been the first person I bought.”

The sound that comes from his chest is something like a wheeze, pushed through his lungs by disbelief looking to burrow deeper. “I couldn’t get into the auction; they’re encrypted. You need an invite link, and you need a password. He wouldn’t give them up to me, but they made sure that everyone knew Claire was involved with me. All of my enemies, and my father’s, had a little extra incentive with her. So, somebody else paid for her… a very good chunk of money, but not enough for a life. Not enough for her life.” I clear my throat, wondering if my voice is betraying the feelings I’ve been trying to deny from the first moment I saw her.

“Before they got her on the plane, I found them and killed them all. Well, I killed *almost* all of them.” I decide not to go into details about Wes right now, since that will probably only serve to confuse him more. “Anyway, a week later you show up to my house, and you start asking questions about her. You had a weird interest in her for a married man, senator.”

“She…” he shakes his head, runs his hand over his face like that will chase away the fog of shock and horror. “She reminded me of someone.”

“Lauren?” I guess, watching the way his entire body goes rigid at the name. But though his body stiffens, his eyes melt, softening so much that they start to shine with tears.

His voice is guarded when he asks, “How do you know about Lauren?”

“This is Elaine’s story, but I’ll tell it anyway since she’s entertaining your wife.”

I do my best to recount the details as Elaine did, and when I mention the pregnancy test, I think Victor might just pass out. It’s a good thing he’s sitting, because he looks as though he’s stopped breathing for a while.

“There was something she wanted to tell me.” He says after a while of silence. “She told me that when I first saw her, but she never got a chance. I was only home for the burial, the service. We had one night together because of how it all worked out, and I forgot to even ask her what was on her mind. When I remembered, I sent her a letter, but I never got a response. None of my letters ever got a response.”

I stay quiet while I let him reflect on that memory, but I can’t give him forever. The flight may be a long one, but we don’t have time to get lost down memory lane. “Well, she likely wanted to tell you she was pregnant. Elaine didn’t see the results of the test. She left that night, and she never saw Lauren again.”

Victor blinks, thinking through whatever must have come after that. “She just disappeared. Ally said it was the strangest thing, that she just… was gone when she woke up.”

He’s not looking at the menu on his lap, having forgotten about it in between all of the information I’ve hit him with, but I slip it open and point to a word on the a la carte menu. “Pregnant.”

He only blinks at me, no dots connecting. “I don’t get it.”

“You won’t appreciate the insinuation, but Elaine thinks that your father somehow knew the people that run these kinds of programs. She thinks that maybe your father handed her over to someone.”

“Handed her over?” Victor laughs. “My father? You can’t be serious.”

“Maybe that’s not what happened. We don’t know because Claire is an orphan. She never even knew her mother. She grew up in foster care until she emancipated herself and went to college, which is where she met my sister.”

“An orphan,” Victor says the word sadly, testing it on his tongue. “Lauren was an orphan. Her parents died when she was a kid, and after her aunt passed, she ended up in a state facility.” He shakes his head. “History has a really weird way of repeating itself.”

“Yes,” I agree, “it does.”

“My wife, Addison… she was Lauren’s guardian ad litem. I had pretty much just re-enlisted when my mother passed. I had two years on my service, and during that time, my sister and Addison did all the work of trying to find her, but they never figured it out. I assumed she started another life somewhere… but Claire is, what, twenty-one?”

I nod my confirmation, and Victor sighs. “And she is absolutely Lauren’s daughter. I’d bet my life on that.”

“She may be your daughter, too.” I say, hoping that doesn’t scare him into shutting down. We’ve been making progress since I brought up Lauren. I don’t want to lose it now.

“No,” Victor reaches for his phone, tapping around on it a minute. “See, when I first saw her, I just couldn’t shake the feeling that she was Lauren’s incarnation. It was like looking at a ghost, except I never got to see Lauren at that age. And it was irrational, but I had to see if she was mine. I don’t know why, but there was just a voice in my head screaming that she was. That’s stupid, I know, cause after Lauren left me, she could have been with any number of men, but I just felt this need to check. I… stole her toothbrush and some of the hair out of her brush while you were downstairs entertaining guests at the wake.”

His face warms with what I assume is embarrassment or shame, and he glances up from his phone to see how harshly I’m judging him.

“And when you took her to the airport, I got onto the same flight she did. I spent the whole flight with her, looking for any similarities to the woman I loved, any similarities to me. I even told her about Lauren, about my high school sweetheart, but I never told her I suspected she was her daughter. I never told her I thought she could be mine.”

He turns his phone to face me, showing me a photo. “I had her DNA tested against mine on nothing other than a weird feeling, but the results were negative.” He shakes his head again as I take the phone and read over the results.

When I look at him, he actually looks sad. “Claire is definitely Lauren’s daughter, but she isn’t mine.”

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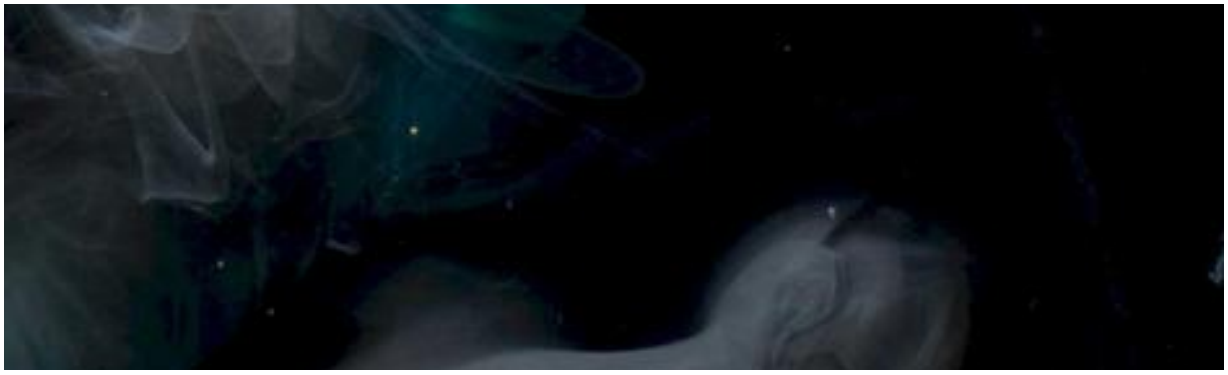

I discovered on the flight home from Costa Rica, when the Senator trapped me into my seat and told me his life story, that flying isn’t always bad. It helps to have someone to distract you, even if that someone is a man nearly twice your age with an almost creepy interest in you. Maybe I had just been so worried that he was my buyer, come to stake his claim, that I hadn’t been able to focus on my nerves about the plane.

Unfortunately, Moose isn’t a good distraction. I mean, he would be if I just needed something to look at, because I can definitely get lost in dirty thoughts about him. But I don’t want him to catch me looking at him, for one thing. And for another, I need to occupy my brain in some way so that I don’t think about the fact that we’re flying in what feels like a giant metal cage, trusting technology and mankind to deliver us to the other side of the country.

Rhea wanted to sit with me, and we had at first. But before takeoff, Moose stalked across the aisle and convinced her that they can’t do their job from behind us. Rhea was apologetic, but it made sense, and it wasn’t really a choice. I don’t doubt that he’d have dragged me out of my seat if she didn’t go willingly.

“You get the window,” he said, tipping his head to make me move over so he could take my spot.

The business class seats Rhea had booked for us were just two wide, meaning that once I complied, I was trapped in my seat at the mercy of Moose, who crossed his arms over his chest, sank in his seat a little, and

then just stared at the screen before him. I tried to read, but after my third time starting the same page, I gave up on that. I did a generally good job of not showing my fear, keeping it in until we hit turbulence.

I make to grab hold of the armrest so fast, I don't realize Moose had put his hand there… until I feel the warmth of his forearm, which I'm squeezing with a death grip. His eyes move from my hand on him to my face, demanding answers which I suppose my expression must do for him. "Scared, princess?" He chuckles.

"I'm not fond of flying." I admit, focusing on breathing through my nose. It was only a little jolt, but it pulled my stomach up to the back of my throat, and now I'm feeling like I'm upside down and my lunch may come spilling out.

"That's a dumb fear." Moose snorts, ripping his arm out from under my touch. My cheeks burn with his disregard as I turn to look out the window, lifting the shade little by little so that I can acclimate to the view. It's weird but looking out helps. If I glance out the window and we're still among the clouds, at least it means we aren't hurtling toward the ground, which is how my body still feels.

The clouds sprawl out below us, white cotton blankets that cover an otherwise bright blue sky. The sunlight illuminates parts of them, making them look silvery and light.

A hand on my shoulder makes me tense, pulling me out of wherever I just disappeared to, and in the reflection of the window, I see Moose looking at me. I turn to face him, wiping at the stray tears that I just realized were lingering on my face. I'm not even sure why I'm crying. Because he told me my fear was dumb? Because he hates me? Because I hate myself? Because, for a second, I thought we may die, and I realized I still haven't done anything with the time I've been given.

"Fear of flying is actually pretty common." His tone is tight, like he doesn't want to admit that my fear is rational. "But it's not a productive fear."

"A productive fear?" I blink. "Is fear ever productive?"

"Of course. It keeps you from doing stupid shit like fucking an entire frat house."

I turn my head back to the window, anger burning through me and making my eyes sting with more tears. I don't care what he thinks of me but having him suggest that I'm a dumb whore hurts more than it should.

Someone told me once that it’s all I’ll ever be, and I wanted him to be wrong.

But maybe he was right. Moose certainly seems to think so.

“Claire…”

I ignore him, and the surprise at hearing him call me by my actual name instead of my last name or the condescending ‘princess’. But Moose is a man, and they don’t like to be ignored. His hand grips my chin, and for some reason—maybe because it’s gentler than I anticipated—I let him turn me to face him. “I wasn’t going to fuck the whole fraternity.”

He laughs, making my anger grow, until he says, “I know.”

“I just want to…”

He lifts an eyebrow, waiting for whatever response I have. His jade green eyes glitter with amusement, and I shake my head, deciding not to tell him. “What do you want?” He prompts, those words surprisingly seductive in the hazy light between us.

I swallow my fear of being vulnerable with him. Maybe if I stop fighting him, he will take it easier on me. It’s easier to just give him what he wants. “I want to feel something.”

I expect him to laugh at me, to tell me that I’m being dramatic, to make a joke about what a desperate slut I am. He does none of that, choosing to repeat my own words back to me. “You want to… feel something?”

I laugh, because now that I’ve heard it out loud from someone else, it sounds ridiculous. The problem isn’t that I can’t feel anything.

The problem is that I feel too many things.

I don’t know how to silence them anymore. My old coping techniques don’t work because they were based on an old version of me. I’ve shed that skin without having another to step in, and I haven’t yet figured out how to quiet the noise in my head.

Being who I was when I was with Remy had helped, but I apparently can’t be that person with the babysitter he hired to watch me. Hypocritical that he let me be myself when he was the one reaping the rewards. It’s why I’m so intent on finding Wes. Because finding him will let me find his father. But I can’t tell anyone about that, either.

“What? What do you want to feel?” Moose asks, studying me. There’s no judgement in his gaze—he just looks curious.

I don’t know how to answer that truthfully. I want to feel like I belong in this world, like I have a place and a meaning and a goal. I want to know that

I’m not the same girl who couldn’t see beyond the ‘then’, so she tried to end it all. But the truth is, I feel just as directionless, just as helpless… even if I’m not the same girl.

“Everything at the right times.”

He doesn’t need to open his mouth to tell me that makes no sense. I can see it written all over his face. “It must be so easy not to be afraid of anything.” I roll my eyes and turn back to the window, not giving him a chance to gloat.

To my surprise, his laugh isn’t smug as I’d expect. “Everyone is afraid of something, Monroe.”

Back on the last name basis, I see. I turn to glare at him. “Yeah? So, tell me what yours is.”

“Only if you guess it.” He smirks.

“Remy?” I try. “You seem awful concerned with not pissing him off.”

“Because pissing off a guy like that would be stupid. He’s powerful, he’s rich.” I roll my eyes again, regretting bringing him up in the first place. But I guess I like pain because I’m the one who invited the topic into conversation. “And he is absolutely obsessed with you.”

I stare at him, trying to figure out whether he’s lying, trying to feed my ego. “Sure, he is. That’s why he gave me permission to fuck whoever I want, right?” I laugh. Of course, I’d have been pissed if he’d had the audacity to tell me no, I didn’t. And it wouldn’t have stopped me from doing any of the flirting I did the other night with Austin.

“I suspect you’ll pay for it later.” Moose laughs a little. “But to answer your question, no. I’m not afraid of your big, scary, billionaire boyfriend.”

I start to tell him Remy’s not my boyfriend, but it seems a moot point to talk about him anymore. “Fine. Clowns?”

His lip twitches, but he remains otherwise impassive. “Not even Gacey.”

“So killer clowns are a no-go, too?” I purse my lips in thought. “Needles?”

That seems like a stupid guess given the tattoos on his neck, a canvas without an inch of space untouched. But I’ve heard that people with fear of needles can still get tattooed because their fear is only of being *pierced* with a needle.

“I like pain, princess. Just like you.”

“I’ve never told you I like pain.”

“You’ve never had to.” He chuckles. “I can read you like a book.”

Another point I want to challenge him on, but I'm not ready to admit defeat yet. "Snakes? No, you look like the sort of psychopath who had one in his childhood bedroom."

Moose laughs deeply, and I don't know if it's because I called him a psychopath or because he is one. "Wrong on both accounts. I'm not afraid of snakes, but that doesn't mean I want to own them."

"Spiders? Cockroaches?"

"Why would I be afraid of something I can crush under my boot? No."

I've been asking him these questions like he's a normal person, but Moose isn't normal just like *I'm* not normal. He's a man with abandonment issues. "Knocking up a one-night stand? Commitment?"

"I'm not afraid to commit to the right cause. And children don't scare me."

"But what about the idea of being responsible for a child?" I argue. "It's objectively different."

"No. I think I do a good job at this whole 'protection' thing, don't you?"

I laugh so loud the woman in front of me turns to glare at us. Moose disarms her with a brilliant smile while I clap a hand over my mouth until the humor subsides. "You aren't seriously telling me that you following me around is like being a father?"

Moose shrugs. "Just call me daddy."

It takes a minute for the joke to sink in, and then I punch him in the shoulder, the both of us laughing together this time. "Not even if I liked you."

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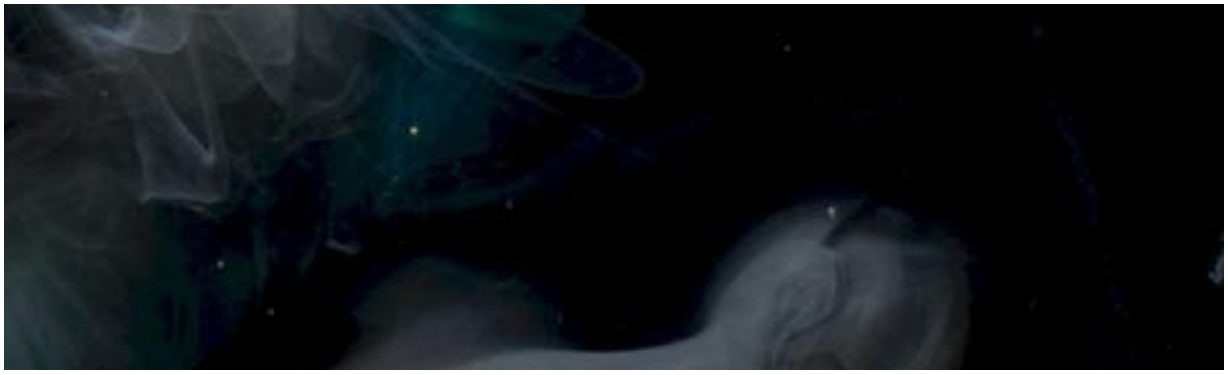

“Why me?” I ask as Kent and I approach the small silver car. “I have no military background, no tactical experience. Wouldn’t Rich have been better suited for this?”

The trees billowing around us sing a sad song, a haunting melody that whistles through the branches. The sun is bright in the clear sky, and the air smells like the fields of wildflowers surrounding us. It betrays nothing of the horror show that awaits us on the other side of all the brilliant colors.

“That’s why I chose you. Rich has a hard time hiding who he is.”

“And me?” I laugh. “If Davos knows I’m coming, wouldn’t you think his people know who to keep an eye out for?”

“No.” Kent assures me. “I promise you that even if they recognize you, these guys will think you’re here to partake.”

I won’t tell Kent, but I’m afraid of what we’ll see when we get in there. I’m even more afraid of what we might *not* see.

If Davos had warning, who’s to say he didn’t have the place cleared and the captives moved? The devastation of another failure is more than I think we can bear, and this time, I have the senator waiting in the wings. If this mission is a bust, I’ll lose the trust and belief he’s placed in me. He doesn’t seem convinced that Lauren was taken for a purpose, but even if Claire isn’t his daughter, he’s willing to help for her connection to the woman he clearly never stopped loving.

The window rolls down a sliver as we approach the passenger side, and the man in it cranes his neck to look out at us. “Michael?”

“John Smith?” I ask, certain that this is the guy just by the way he looks at us… like we’re the hope he hasn’t dared to have.

“I—You’re him?”

“We’re here to help.” I assure him. “But you’re a big part of this. I need you to play it cool. Do what you always do.”

John Smith, which is certainly not his real name and just a pseudonym to try and protect him from our judgement, nods and unlocks the doors. I slip into the front seat while Kent slides into the back and leans into the center between us. The two of us switched into a nice set of suits before we got off the plane, and we look every bit the part we’re here to play.

I’ve played this part before, though never under the scrutiny of other men. And I never claimed to be a good actor. “I’m not a monster, you know?” John looks at Kent in the rearview mirror as he turns the key in the ignition. He’s quiet until the gates appear ahead of us, and he blurts out, “I was just lonely. I didn’t know when I first came what they… what they really do here.”

Kent squeezes his shoulder in what looks like reassurance. “We’re just a couple of friends here for a good time, okay, John? No judgement, no concerns. You’re just sharing the wealth.”

John nods, pulling up to the gate and swallowing back his fear as he presses the call button that’s situated between the statuesque legs of a woman’s form.

Classy.

The callbox next to the statue hums to life with static, and then a gruff voice says, “Ja?”

“I’m here for my appointment.” John says, craning his neck a little to speak louder into the box. “It’s John Smith.”

“Password, John Smith?”

“Vagabond.” John clears his throat, waiting for more from the guard on the other end of the callbox. But he says nothing, and a moment later, the gates grind open to allow us to pass.

John adjusts his hands on the steering wheel, and I can tell from over here that he’s sweaty. If he doesn’t calm down, he’s going to give us away before we even walk through the door. Fortunately, Kent is good at talking him down. He feeds him the assurance he needs, warning him that he has to get it together for his girl, and that seems to be all it takes to renew his confidence.

By the time we park and approach the big double doors, John seems to have taken on the confidence of a complete stranger, walking with his shoulders squared and not the faintest bit of nervousness. He presses the call button again, presumably gets the same guard he spoke to last time. He repeats the process as he did before, this time with a different password, “Voyeur”.

I’m sensing a theme, but I keep it to myself.

The doors click as they open automatically, and John pushes his way through them with a swagger. They close behind us automatically, just as they opened, and Kent and I focus on following John, taking in our surroundings just enough to pass off the illusion that we’re customers. There’s a desk set up in the center of the massive room, a great dark wood table with a woman sitting behind it, her eyes trained on the papers spread out before her. She doesn’t offer us any greeting as we approach, waiting until John stops before her. “Hello, Natalia.”

The woman looks up and manages a smile, though it’s tight and uninterested. “Hello, Mr. Smith. You’ve brought friends?”

“I did.” John nods for her. “I was telling some of my colleagues about this place, and they wanted to come check it out for themselves.”

“Of course.” Natalia agrees, standing and smoothing the black pencil skirt clinging to her thighs. “Right this way, gentlemen.”

She doesn’t spare a glance at Kent or I as she leads us off to the right, down a hall where iron bars block the path. She gestures to the baroque looking gold couch next to the gate, and I follow John’s lead, sitting down as Natalia passes a clipboard to Kent and another to me. “You’ll need to fill out your intake form, and I’ll need a copy of your I.D.s.”

I glance at Kent anxiously as he reaches for his wallet with zero hesitation, pulling his ID out and passing it between his fingers for her to take. I didn’t bring a fake, and Kent seemed confident that my real identity won’t blow our cover, so I reluctantly hand mine over as well.

Natalia leaves us with our IDs in hand and saunters away on her heels, little clicks echoing through the drafty old walls. It’s weird, how quiet it is here.

It’s unsettling, and I’m not even sure why.

I turn my eyes to the paperwork before me, wondering whether I’m applying for a loan or visiting a brothel. I know Davos takes the utmost precautions with the auctions, but I never imagined his process here to be

so… sophisticated. I scan down the page, filling out the waiver, agreeing to their privacy policy, and releasing them from any liability that may occur on the premises.

Kent fills out his form easily, like this isn't the most barbaric thing he's ever done, and I start to second guess him as my stomach churns at what we're about to see. John, meanwhile, stands with one hand in his pocket and his phone in the other, scrolling as if he's bored.

When Natalia comes back to return our IDs, she takes the applications and nods toward the gate, where she presses a small doorbell. A guard appears a moment later, dressed in the uniform I'll be stealing off of his body. His face is obscured by a wide-brimmed cap, which is weird given that we're indoors, but I don't contemplate it as he fits a key in the lock and slides the grate open to allow us entrance.

John leads the way, entering the long hallway. It's dimly lit, but I can see another grate at the end of it, and realize we're caged in now, without any weapons of our own. I fucking hope that Kent knows what he's doing.

There's an alcove to the right and one to the left a little further down, the space lit by torches even though I know the place has electricity. I guess they like the medieval ambiance. The guard leads us to the first alcove, where he demands we empty our pockets, take off our belts, and runs a metal wand over us looking for any bits of metal. I suppose they really do treat it like a prison.

Once he's been assured that we aren't smuggling our own weapons in, he leads us into what I can only consider an armory. Guns sit displayed in a glass case, resting upon a velvet cloth, and knives adorn the long wall behind them… they have varying lengths, different striations in the teeth, different materials for the handle. My stomach twists again as I look at them, and when I tear my attention away it only gets worse. "If you'd like to take anything from the a la carte menu, you may add it to your purchase now." The guard says, his thick accent sounding uninterested.

The sex toys are in a glass case to the right, and I'm not sure if I should be more outraged about them using the same toys for all their prisoners or the fact that they allow weapons to be used upon them. They're both despicable in very different ways.

Kent taps his mouth thoughtfully as he runs his hands along the edge of the case, appraising the offering of dildos in varying colors and lengths. I recognize some of it—gags, clamps, handcuffs, vibrators. Other things, I

don’t recognize. I turn my eyes away from them and glance up at the wall of knives again, looking for one with a clean edge. I’m not looking to make a mess.

John chooses some stuff that makes me think is his usual order, while Kent picks out a horribly huge double-ended dildo, handcuffs, a serrated knife, and a gun.

When I catch his eye, he smirks. “I like to stuff all the holes at once.”

I squeeze out a laugh that feels like I’m choking on desert sand, and we follow the guard back through the hall to the main room, where he passes us off to Natalia to make our payments. None of us balk at the quarterly cost, choosing an hour without hesitation, and Natalia runs our cards as a set of men come out of the long hallway opposite.

One guard, and the customer, with his black suit and an embarrassed grin on his face.

“Sorry about that,” the customer says, running a hand through his slicked back hair anxiously. “I never would have guessed she had a heart problem. I just love how tight her pussy got when I shocked her.”

“She wasn’t listed as having a heart problem.” Natalia frowns, looking up at him as if we’ve ceased to matter right now. She sighs, clearly irritated about something, and then glances down at the computer screen before her. “Tell you what? She’s probably still warm, if you wanna pay for another fifteen?”

The man licks his lips in thought, and I find myself staring at him as he contemplates the offer.

“Will you comp the cables for it?”

“Sure.” Natalia shrugs, unbothered.

“Add it to my tab.” The man says, turning to go back to whatever hell he just emerged from.

“Necrophilia?” Kent asks, his voice much lighter than mine could be right now. He almost sounds intrigued.

Natalia shrugs, clicking around on the computer as she processes his payment. “It’s a niche kink, but you never know until you try it. At least we’ll get one last use from 1847 before we dispose of her.”

John murmurs his agreement, and I think I must be the crazy one because everyone else is doing a damn good job acting like that isn’t the most horrifying thing they’ve ever heard. “And you’re paying the upcharge for a private room?”

“Yes,” we say in unison.

Can’t have cameras watching what we’re about to do. The cells are monitored and recorded, but private rooms allow discretion—for a hefty fee.

“Thank you, sir.” Natalia hands Kent’s card back to him and takes mine, processing the payment I blindly agreed to. “Here you are, Mr. Boudreaux.” She hands my card back to me, and then bends down to grab something from below her desk, offering us a view of her tits pushed together in the red top she’s wearing.

The menus.

She gives one to Kent and the other to me, grinning at John when she says, “The usual, sir?”

“Yes.” John agrees easily.

I take my time surveying my options for Natalia’s benefit, as if I hadn’t already memorized every face in these pages. They’ve haunted me all week, keeping me from sleep, and I suspect even if we save them all, I won’t sleep for at least another week.

Kent sighs, glancing up to see Natalia watching him. “Are *you* on the menu, sweetheart?”

Natalia manages a smile. “I’m not, but there is a very nice selection. Inmate 1724 is a fan favorite.”

Kent glances down, checking to see if the suggestion is to his taste. “But everything has a price, right? Name yours.”

Natalia laughs shrilly, and I can’t tell if she appreciates being propositioned or not. “I don’t have a price because I am not on the menu.”

“Mm.” Kent agrees. “So, what if I order off menu? I prefer to dine al fresco, anyway.”

Natalia shakes her head. “I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

“I’m afraid you’re wrong.” Kent says, his voice taking on a dangerous quality. “Call your master and we’ll see just how much you’re worth to him.”

Natalia’s eyes widen and her face flushes as she casts a quick glance around, as if her masters could be lurking. “I…”

“Or we could make a more direct deal. Cut out the middleman?”

“Sir, I…”

“Tick Tock, Natalia. You know my time is money, and I know yours is, too.”

Her eyes glance up at me, and then turn back to Kent. “And what did you have in mind, sir?”

Kent grins, picking up a pen from the desk and writing a figure on it that makes Natalia’s eyes widen again. She glances at his receipt, no doubt thinking about what he ordered off the a la carte menu and wondering whether it’s worth it. I’m sure Natalia is trying to decide if a little temporary torture is worth the chance to pay whatever debt is keeping her a hostage here.

“Very well.” She agrees.

The guard laughs at her. “You’re gonna piss the masters off, you dirty bird.”

“I’m a woman free to fuck whomever I please for whatever sum I wish.” Natalia replies curtly, her eyes snapping to me. “Have you made a selection? The men are at the back, if that’s your preference?”

“Just so many options.” I sigh to cover the nausea threatening to turn my stomach. “But I think I’ll have this one.” I point at the picture, and Natalia smiles a little.

“Our special of the day. Good choice, Mr. Boudreaux.”

The way she says my name tells me she knows who I am, but nobody’s come to escort me off the premises yet, so I guess I’ll just lean in. “I’m assuming your special is usually more compliant as the day wears on and I won’t have to resort to excess force?”

Natalia offers me a small smile. “You may use as much force or as little as you wish, but I assure you by this point, it is well aware of the consequences for failure to comply.”

It.

Kent is assuming that Natalia is a victim here in some capacity, but given her blasé attitude, I have to wonder whether she isn’t here by her own volition. She taps around on the computer, presses a few keys, and then smiles. “The products are being delivered to your room as we speak. If you will have a seat, the escorts will be here momentarily to show you to your room. We hope you enjoy your stay.”

John and I go to sit together, waiting for the guards to come back for us, while Natalia catches Kent’s eye and gestures for him to follow her. He does, tailing her up the steps that she ascends quickly, unhindered by the stilettos on her feet.

I breathe a sigh of relief when she's gone, wondering what Kent's game is here. Next to me, John flips through a menu that has been left on the coffee table, as if we're just at the car dealer waiting on an oil change or something.

We aren't alone long when two guards come from opposite directions to gather us. "Mr. Boudreaux," the first says, ushering me toward the other staircase that Kent and Natalia *didn't* go up.

"Inmate 4152 is currently in use," the other man tells John. "But they're just finishing up. I'll escort you to the room in just a minute."

John nods, though he looks displeased that someone else has visited the person he's here to see. "Have fun!" He calls behind me. His laugh follows me up the steps that I trail the guard on. My eyes focus on the briefcase in his hand, assuming that's where the knife I ordered is stashed.

I'm going to have a very slim window of opportunity here, but my anxiety has gone away only to be replaced with fury. I'll kill every guard in this place myself, and Natalia too, and I'll do it without remorse. I haven't even seen the cells yet, and I'm already so rattled by the horrors here that I want to burn it to the ground. And I will, just as soon as we finish what we started.

We studied the schematics of the castle from before it landed in Davos' ownership, and with the information John gave Michael, I know when we pass the second-floor landing that the control room is just down there. Once I overtake my chaperone here, I'll backtrack this way and meet Kent for shift change. A glance at my watch assures me we have twenty minutes left… plenty of time.

Hopefully John has the wherewithal to lie low, given that our timelines will differentiate.

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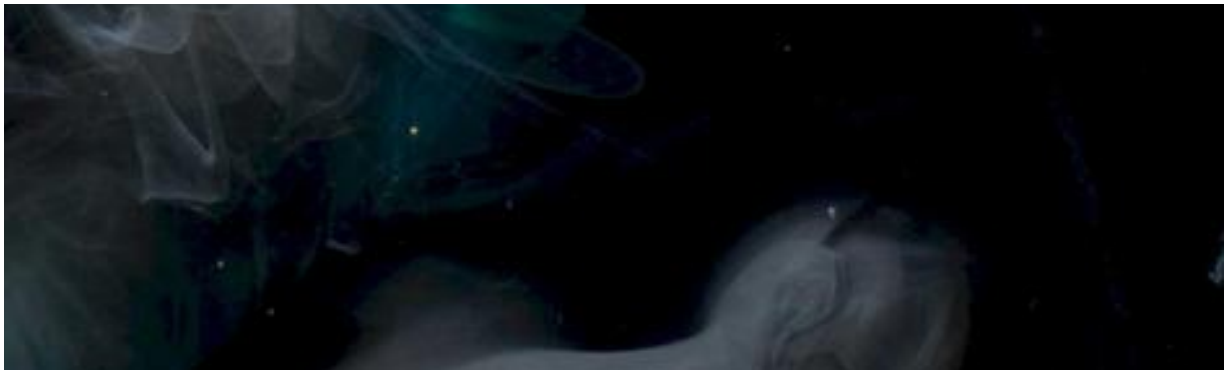

We take the third-floor landing—or at least, I assume it is the third-floor landing, though when I glance over the balconette as we pass, it looks like we're much higher than that. To my surprise, there aren't many doors… just a few on each side, with tarnished gold letters instead of numbers pinned to the dark wood doors. We stop outside of room C for just a moment as the guard ahead of me pulls a key from the ring at his waist.

When he gets the door open, I realize why there aren't many rooms. If they're all the same size as this, no wonder there aren't more. It's a massive space, with light filtering through a stained-glass window that casts a red glow over the four poster bed in the center of the room. And on the center of the bed is a woman whose long legs drape over the side of the satin sheets. Luxurious, but not very practical.

The woman, 2278, is newer. I know as much because the 'special' is, according to John, usually a recent inmate they intend to break. But she doesn't look broken as she looks at me with hatred in her dark eyes. She looks pissed.

I don't pay her any more attention as the guard sets the briefcase up on the table and spins the combination. He steps back as I step in, watching me appraise the blade. "This is what you selected, sir?"

I purse my lips, squint my eyes, and lift the knife, testing the edge against my finger. "It seems rather dull."

The guard furrows his brow and steps toward me to test my claim himself. It gives me the opening I need to lunge at him, wrapping one arm

around his mouth and nose and the other pinning him to my front.

I don't waste a second, ignoring the woman's scream. I'm sure that no one will think twice about a woman's scream in a place like this, but I can't have the guard calling out for help. I press my hand tighter over his mouth as he tries to gnash at me with his teeth, and I let the blade fall to the ground as I grab his chin with one hand, jerking his neck with every bit of energy I have.

I've never snapped anyone's neck before, but it's surprisingly easier than I thought it would be. My hatred for these people seems to give me animal strength, and I don't even think about it until it's done.

The guard falls slack against me before I drop him to the ground, his death instant. He got off easy compared to the torture his prisoners go through, but this mission isn't about trying to make them pay. This is about doing the greatest good.

I let his body fall to the floor without ceremony and glance up to see that the woman is now holding the blade between us. And it's all that's between us, because she is entirely naked, showcasing the bruises and welts across her skin in varying stages of decay—older and yellowing ones beneath purple and blue, intersecting red welts and older scars. I decide to focus on her eyes, which are glaring at me with abject hatred. They don't even betray a hint of fear.

"It's okay," I tell her honestly. "I'm here to help." I raise my hands to show her that I'm harmless, and then slowly reach for my jacket. I don't even know if she speaks English, a thought that didn't occur to me until she stares blankly at me. Hopefully, she at least understands the word *help*.

She more than understands it, judging by her cynical laugh. "Help? Man doesn't help." She speaks with an accent that suggests English is her second language, but she seems to know it well. "Man hurts. Man takes. Let me go." Her eyes flicker to the door behind me as she assesses whether she has a chance of slipping past me.

"I will." I tell her, taking the key from the lock and shutting the door before locking it again. Her eyes narrow, her anger grows, and she steps back away from the bed and away from me.

"I am not afraid. I will kill you."

"Don't kill me." I say slowly, slipping the ring of keys between my fingers as I go back to removing my jacket. When I hold it out for her, she stares at me with disdain, refusing to step closer. I can't exactly blame her

for that, so I toss it gently to her, letting it fall at her feet so that she doesn't have to come closer to pick it up. I tug the buttons free of my shirt with my other hand, slipping quickly out of it. Her eyes watch me with utmost hatred as I slip out of my slacks, and I notice her breathing increase as her chest rises and falls faster.

She does a damn good job of acting unafraid, and I'm certain that someone—or multiple someone's—have made it a point to let her know they get off on her terror.

Interest begins to take over as she watches me stop at my boxers, not going any further or any closer to her as I bend down to begin stealing the guard's clothes. Undressing another man is not the highlight of my life, but I make quick work of it, pulling his shoes off before taking his pants and shirt. He's a little larger than I am, so I take his belt too, notching it on the last hole, and stand to look at her as I fit the cap on my head.

"Doesn't suit you," she says coldly.

"That's not very nice." I muse. "My jacket would probably suit you, if you wanna suck up your pride." When she doesn't move, I shrug and stoop to take the only weapon the guard had on him—a taser—and stuff it into my pocket. "If you want to make a prison break naked, be my guest."

She laughs, and that makes me laugh, too. Both of us stop when I point at the knife in her hand. "I'm gonna need that back now."

"I'm not stupid." She laughs. "Man tries to trick you. No."

"I have no interest in tricking you," I tell her. "I just need to make sure he's dead."

Her eyes flicker to the man in his boxers on the ground. "Check for pulse."

"No, I want to be very certain. I need to see his blood."

"I can do that." She smirks, thinking she's got me in check. But I have no interest in playing with her life. I gesture to the body and take a step back, giving her space to do her thing. A glance at my watch shows that fifteen minutes have passed since I last checked, and we are running out of time. I guess it really does fly when you're having fun.

She doesn't take her eyes off me as she gets closer, dropping to her knees still nude, making me look away until she presses them together. "One clean slice across the throat should do it." I tell her.

But she reaches for his boxers, her long fingers slipping under the material and yanking them down his thighs. His small dick is flaccid even

when she picks it up in her hand. I narrow my eyes on her.

“I’m in a bit of a hurry…” I tell her as delicately as possible. I hate to deny a woman the chance to return the torture she’s endured, but mutilation isn’t on my agenda. She tuts her tongue, looking annoyed with me, but seems to take the hint. Her hand falls away from him and she moves her arm back, gathering momentum.

There’s a squelch as she drives it straight into his dick, and I cringe, my whole body clenching at the pseudo pain.

“Lots of blood,” she says, glancing up at me from under thick lashes. “Happy?”

I’m certain that no one could have survived *that* without reacting, and the lack of spurting blood assures me his heart has already stopped pumping.

“Mm.” I nod. “Something like that.” I glance at my watch. “Time to go. You coming? Or would you rather stay here?”

She narrows her eyes at me before stepping back to grab my button-up off the floor. It’s a better choice, and she fastens the middle buttons quickly before slipping the jacket over top of it. I watch her free her wild hair from the collar, and then she bends down to wrap her hand around the blade still sticking out of the guard’s cock. I think she caught a testicle under that blade, too.

I manage not to wince this time when she pulls it out, unlocking the door and ushering her ahead of me. Her eyes make her distrust obvious, and I can’t exactly blame her, but I’m not letting her walk with a blade at my back. She’s not willing to walk in front of me because she just saw that I don’t need a weapon to take down a man the same size as me. And, probably, because the weapon she is most afraid of is my favorite appendage.

I nod, recognizing my mistake, and settle for walking ahead of her while keeping her close. “We have to meet someone on the second floor,” I tell her. “Do you know where the masters are?”

“Top floor.” She shudders, wrapping my jacket tighter around her. “That’s where they initiate us.”

I don’t care to know what the initiation process entails, but this is useful knowledge. Hopefully, they stay out of the way, and we can break away in silence before they ever have a chance to realize I stole their prisoners right out from under them. Rich has got a grenade back on the plane that he’s dying to pull the pin out of, and that’ll taker care of the masters.

I press my finger to my lips, warning her to stay quiet as we move to the staircase. I keep my head on a swivel, my eyes sweeping back and forth over every surface as we descend. I wish I had a gun, but without any ammunition, it would have been useless. Hopefully I can take one from one of the guards in the communications room.

The woman next to me freezes on the steps when she spots Kent, standing in the same uniform as me, outside the door to the communication room. Natalia is nowhere to be seen, and I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about that.

"It's okay," I tell her in a quiet voice. "He's a friend. He's safe."

I can tell she doubts at this point whether any man is safe, but she tightens her grip on the knife and continues moving. Kent's eyes snap up to mine almost as soon as we spot him, but he doesn't let any emotion pass as we approach. I glance at my watch. Two minutes.

"You need to stay out of sight," I tell the woman next to me. "Over there." I gesture behind a gaudy vase filled with fake flowers set up on a marble pedestal, and she glowers at me but goes. "Don't move until I tell you it is safe."

Kent shakes his head a little as he watches her go. She certainly isn't the traumatized and terrorized prisoner we expected, and I'm grateful for that. I never did well comforting any of the women in my life before, and I don't have the time or energy to give them any effort right now. "Where's Natalia?"

"Hopefully, still bleeding all over her pretty floral sheets," he grunts. "The only thing worse than a man who treats women like animals is a woman who enables them." He slips open his jacket pocket and passes me a pistol. "And look what I got out of it."

"She was packing this?" I ask dubiously. That black skirt looked a bit too short to be hiding a gun, even a small one like this.

"No," Kent laughs harshly. "She pulled it on me the minute I got her out of those clothes… not that I was going to try and pass myself off in them, but it was fun watching her give me her dignity, knowing how many she's helped strip it from."

"Dead?"

"As a doornail." He nods, not looking the least bit remorseful. And I don't really feel bad, either.

I want to ask how he got the guard’s uniform, though, and if he has any idea where John went, but the door opens, and we fall silent, dropping our heads.

Time to dance.

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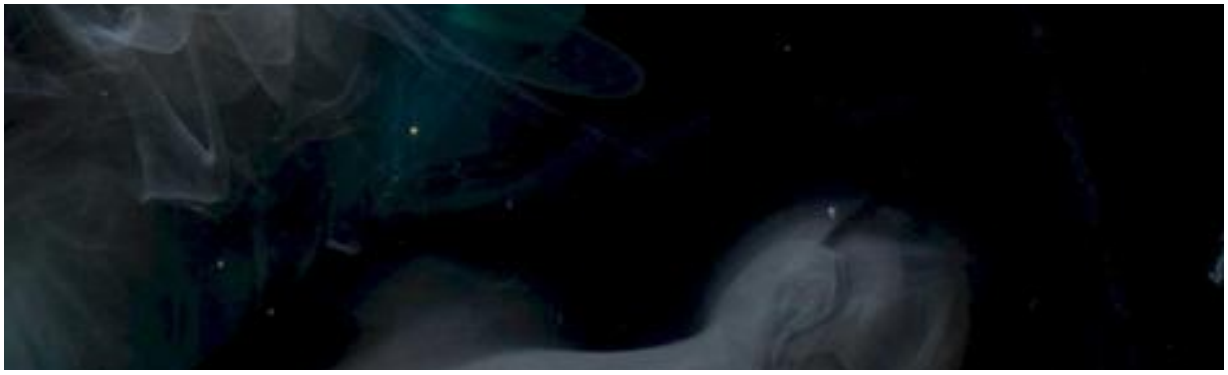

When Rhea said she rented us a house, I should have known better than to think it would be anything normal. She rented us a mansion—secluded, serene, and the sort of place you can get lost in.

But it's not the sort of place I can get lost from.

I'd entertained the idea of a beach packed with bodies and so many people to occupy their attention that I'd be able to slip away. This isn't that.

"We really needed this massive mansion for our week stay?" I ask her ruefully as we stand on the other side of the door, waiting for someone to come open it. Of course, even on vacation we are staying somewhere with a full staff. How incredibly awkward.

"I wouldn't say we *needed* it." Rhea shrugs. "Actually, I didn't tell you the whole truth about what we're doing here."

Next to me, Moose glowers at her. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"So, I didn't actually rent this house. We're sort of… staying with a friend."

"A friend?" Eli asks suspiciously, at the same time I groan.

"Rhea…"

Moose decides he's had enough waiting and rings the doorbell three times in quick succession. He's raising his fist to start beating on the door when it opens to a half-naked man with his shorts hanging low on his hips and a red plastic cup in his hand.

"Ray!" He slurs, pulling the door open further and practically falling into her as he wraps his arms around her neck.

I study the man’s face, looking for any indication of whether I know him. When he disengages himself from my best friend, his sloppy smile widens for me. “Claire!”

I don’t get a chance to wonder how he knows me, because the man treats me to the same welcome as Rhea, throwing his weight onto me until my knees buckles and I struggle to stay standing. His drink sloshes onto my toes as he sways with me, but it doesn’t last long, because Moose pulls him off me in an instant, shoving him backwards.

As he straightens with a sheepish grin, I recognize him.

Austin.

“I’m glad you guys could make it!” He says, beaming as his eyes flicker from me to my best friend. “Even if you did have to bring the muscle.”

The muscle in question glares at him as I try to comprehend what the hell is going on. Austin was great up until he handcuffed me to his bed for my jackass bodyguard. Would he have done that for anyone willing to pay him for it? And is he really expecting me to pretend that didn’t happen?

“Well, come on in!” Austin chuckles, gesturing us forward. He swings the door open wider, letting us into the house.

It’s beautiful in a cold way… marble floors and pristine white walls that stretch up high over our heads. The music coursing from speakers somewhere is some kind of rap, and it doesn’t help the sudden headache I have.

“How was your flight?” Austin asks, though I don’t know who he is asking. He’s grinning at all of us collectively, as if we aren’t all confused to see him in the beach house we were supposed to have rented.

“It was great!” Rhea chirps, slinging her bag on the ground. “But long, so we need to freshen up. And a drink would help.”

“Say no more!” Austin turns to get her something. “You know where your rooms are, right?”

Rhea assures him that she does, and Austin disappears around a corner. “What the hell?” I snap.

“It’s a group trip.” She explains with a shrug. “Half of our freshman dorm is here. One last week of being young, dumb college kids before we graduate and have to be proper adults.”

A group trip.

The idea sounds like torture. I don’t like anyone well enough to spend a week living with them, much less a week of constant partying. I groan at

the same time Moose curses her under his breath.

“Come on, Claire.” Rhea chuckles. “These people are our friends. They’ve been with us for the last three and a half years. Is it really so weird to you that they want to have one last hurrah?”

I’m starting to tell her I don’t have friends when a girl comes down the stairs adjacent to where we stand. Like us, she stops talking when she spots us. “Rhea! Claire! You guys made it!”

Lucy jogs down the rest of the steps, her strawberry blonde hair swaying in a ponytail as she takes them fast in an effort to throw herself at us. And she does just that, spreading her arms and pulling us both into a hug at the same time. “Oh my god, I’ve missed you guys!”

“I’ve missed you too, Luce!” Rhea says genuinely, pulling away to get a good look at our former roommate. I haven’t seen her since before we left Darrington last summer to go back to Cove Harbor. She moved in with her boyfriend while we were gone, and we haven’t had any classes together this year. And I’ve been a terrible friend. That is clear when I see the diamond glittering on her ring finger.

“Claire!” Lucy beams. “You look amazing!”

I look jet-lagged and confused, probably, but Lucy is sweet. She literally sees the best in everyone. “You’re glowing.” I tell her, taking in her suntanned glow and brilliant smile. “Between that rock on your hand and your smile, you may actually blind me.”

There’s a hint of jealousy in my tone that I don’t even understand. I hate it, considering I have zero interest in Lucy’s boyfriend—fiancée. “It’s beautiful.” I smile, hoping she doesn’t notice the falter in my previous statement. It’s not like I’m seeing anyone, so the jealousy is unfounded.

Lucy giggles sheepishly, raising her hand to let the ring glitter in the light. Rhea snatches her hand from the air after a second, bringing it down so she can let the piece glitter under different angles. “It’s gorgeous!” Rhea croons.

“He picked it himself.” Lucy grins. “He did a good job, huh?”

“He sure did.” I smile, and it takes me a moment to realize I didn’t have to force it. Lucy’s energy is hard to deny. She’s a happy person by nature, but something about seeing her so excited for the future makes her look radiant. And I realize, I’m happy *for* her.

Next to me, Moose makes a sound like he’s suffering a slow death, and Lucy’s eyes flit to him before they round a little. “Oh, I didn’t mean to be

rude. I'm Lucy." She puts her hand out for him to shake, which he does with only the briefest hesitation.

"Moose." He says, before she takes Eli's hand and does the same.

"Are you guys…?" Lucy's eyes flit between me and Moose.

"No." I rush out. "Moose is my stepbrother. He has no social skills, and our dad was worried about him, so I was nice enough to bring him on vacation with us."

The lie comes so easily that I don't even stop to think about why I'm saying it. Lucy is sweet, but we had a surface level friendship. We're the type who gather in groups, watch movies together and comment on the bad acting, and make plans we never intend to keep. We care about each other, sure, but she doesn't know the first thing about me. Therefore, she has no idea that I don't have parents, much less a stepbrother.

Rhea chuckles at the look on Moose's face, but I don't bother to turn to take it in because Austin walks back into the foyer at that moment with a cup in each hand.

You'd think after being poisoned, I may exercise caution in taking a drink from someone I don't know super well. Especially someone who let my bodyguard drug me and locked me up for him. But if we're going to be here, we may as well try to enjoy it.

Rhea and I take the drinks he offered and tap them together before we toss them back.

I ignore Moose's judgement, used to it by this point.

He's had a stick up his ass from the moment we met. I think it may have been there from the moment he was born. Poor guy.

If anyone needs laid, it's him.

And I'm going to make that happen for him.

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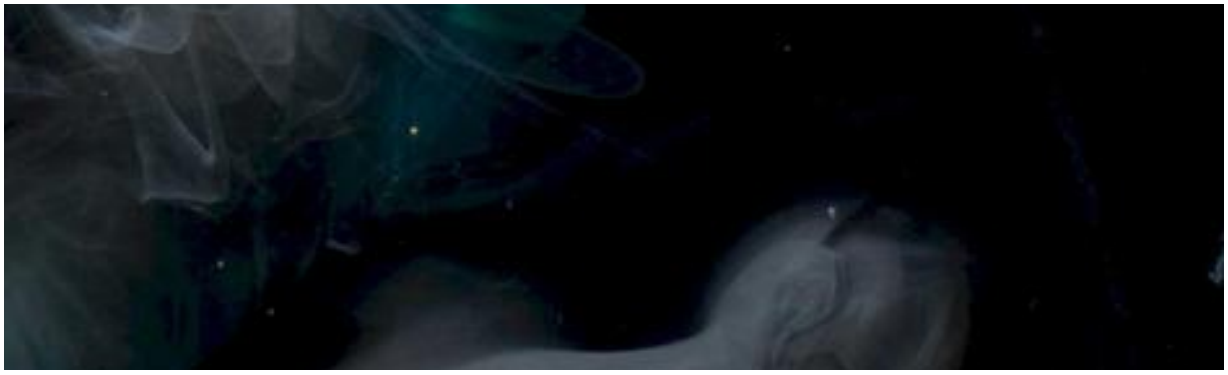

I have the pistol tucked in the belt I took from the guard, but a shot would likely draw the wrong kind of attention. I could tell by the weight that it's loaded, though I don't know how many shots I'll get out of it, so I leave my hand to hover on my belt, where the taser is stashed away safely. A second too soon or a second too late, and I could ruin everything. It's why I chose the knife for this, but I won't begrudge a victim the sense of security that comes from holding it.

The guards leaving are caught up in conversation, one staring down at his phone and the other peering over his shoulder as they barely even move out the door. "But did you see the spark? Look at that! It's just one last big—*there*!" He jabs a finger at his phone, highlighting the moment he wants his coworker to witness.

I see Kent glance at me from the corner of my eye, indicating the unexpected opportunity we've been presented. A curt nod tells me he's going for the one directly before him, which leaves me the one looking over his friend's shoulder at the phone.

Fortunately, Kent knows exactly what he's doing. I may be faking it, but he moves with confidence, casual and quiet, as he strides to the two like he, too, wants to see what's on the phone. And just as they look up to share their excitement, Kent's hands close around his twig-like neck.

Confusion is still trying to dawn on the guard's face when I slip the taser from my pocket and hold it to his neck.

I’ve never used one of these before—I’m not sure how long you’re supposed to hold it, or how long it would take to immobilize him. It’s not enough to kill him alone, but I feel his body stiffen against mine as I wrap my arm around his throat, putting him in a headlock he’s hopeless to escape, and use my strength to pin him in place for the electricity to do its thing.

Next to me, the man who Kent attacked is turning purple, his eyes bulging as his body strains for air. I can’t focus on him, though, when I’m putting every bit of my energy into crushing the windpipe of the man against me. His body is stiff and heavy, and he smells of greasy French fries and piss, but I focus ahead of me. We left the door open so that it wouldn’t raise suspicions while we take them out, and I’m diligently focused on the gaudy artwork in the hall—until the woman—Number 2278—stands, coming out from her hiding spot.

I squeeze both my arm and the button of the taser tighter as she draws near without even glancing around to be sure that no one is around to see her.

“Hide!” I manage to growl at her, breathless as I funnel all of the energy I’ve ever had into this man’s death. He could be dead already, for all I know, and just not seem that way because of the electricity I’m pumping into his body.

I don’t know how much time has passed; I just know that I haven’t yet felt his throat collapse under the pressure.

She doesn’t stop or turn to run. Instead, she comes closer, walking slowly but with purpose. Her eyes make contact with mine for one brief moment, just long enough to show me she’s lucid, and then she drives the knife into his stomach. I drop the taser, letting the world come back to me a little, to hear the sound of the squelch as she draws it back out. A little sound comes from the back of the guard’s throat, but I know it wasn’t intentional, since he hasn’t taken any air into his lungs for at least two minutes.

Without the electricity, I can feel him slump against me, his weight threatening to knock me back into the panel of cameras behind us. I let him fall, stepping out of the way to avoid wearing his blood as he falls upon the ground… next to the man Kent took out a moment before.

By the time I look up, he’s already shut and locked the door behind us and is striding back to the communications panel, assessing the array of screens, buttons, and levers. It looks like how I imagine a submarine or a

rocket, and I don’t even know the beginning of what means what. Killing comes naturally to Kent, but this he studied for. His eyes sweep the panels, and then he turns to the woman with us, her eyes narrowed as she watches us, still unsure whether she can trust us. “What’s your name?”

She only hesitates a moment, and then she must decide she’ll give us this. “Kaia.”

“Kaia.” He nods. “I’m Kent. That’s Remy. We’re here to free you… all of you.”

Kaia’s eyes narrow more, sliding from him to me. “Why?”

I would laugh if the adrenaline wasn’t coursing through me so fast that I feel out of control. “Because what happens here? Those are crimes against humanity. And I have a foolish hope for humanity, okay? So, we’re gonna get you all out of here. But you’re *in this* now. Do you understand?” Kaia looks like she doesn’t, but she nods anyway, causing him to continue. “If they catch us, they’ll only kill us. But if they catch you…”

“Worse than death.” She agrees, turning her eyes toward the screens. “You will free everyone?”

I’m opening my mouth to say we’re going to try, but Kent speaks first. “Every last one. But we need your help. You’ve got to convince them to come with us, okay, Kaia? Can you do that?”

I glance at my watch and then up at the screens to scan for movement. They aren’t set to a single station, each of the nine panels flashing between different parts of the property, the cells.

“Why me?” Kaia asks, turning toward me now. “Why do I have to?”

“Because you saw that we’re serious. And if you watch the screens—” I tap the display of one as it flickers over to a view of a clearing, and the ATV emerging from it. It’s impossible to see who is on it from the slightly pixelated view, but the lack of uniform assures me it’s one of our men. “These are more people here to help.”

“Some of the people here—” Kent says calmly, “They’ve been here so long, they don’t know much else. Some of them are so scared that they would rather the devil they know. Some of them won’t understand. But you can make them, okay?”

The first real hint of fear I’ve seen in her shines in her dark eyes, but she swallows it down and nods, taking on the burden we shouldn’t have to place on her. “What do I do?”

“Just get them to trust us. As many as you can. Don’t fight with them, don’t try to reason. You just tell as many of them as you can that this isn’t a trick, and we will handle the rest. Can you do that?”

Kaia nods, and Kent cracks a grin, his white teeth gleaming. He looks more like a politician than a soldier right now, but his eyes are genuine, and he’s full of purpose. “I’m so proud of you.” He tells her, nodding.

And then he turns to the dashboard behind us and locates the button he needs.

“The outside is more heavily staffed than the inside because they’re arrogant. They trusted that their fortress couldn’t be taken, but they’re wrong. We have to at least consider we may be wrong, too. There could be more guards that we don’t know about.” His eyes flash to me, making sure I’m listening. “Men’s and women’s cells are on separate sides, and we’re freeing them all. When I disengage the locks on the cells, chaos is going to happen. Keep a clear head, Boudreaux.” I nod. “I’ll go to the men’s cells. I have a bit more experience with captive men—prisoners of war.” He clears his throat. “You and Kaia will have to sprint to the women’s cells. There are more of them, and it’s gonna take you both staying calm but urgent. Got it?”

I nod, preparing to ask again about John, but he shakes his head real quick, like he’s trying to clear his head of something. It’s just a moment, and then he nods, let’s out a small breath, and slams his hand over the button. There’s a strange clicking sound, as if the locks disengaging are on the other side of the door.

“Go!” He tells us.

We don’t have to be told twice.

I seize Kaia by the wrist and pull her with me, through the door that automatically opened when Kent did the override, and toward the staircase. She doesn’t try to pull out of my grip or slow down, running with me, our footfalls in step as we thunder down the stairs into the empty foyer. I see the knife in her free hand, and idly think about how dangerous it is to run down steps with such a jagged knife in her hand. It’s a stupid thought, a random moment of clarity in the chaos of my heart pounding, sweat rolling down my back, and my chest feeling like it may implode.

The grates on either side of the foyer have been opened, and I can hear a tangle of noise coming from both sides. It encompasses us as we run straight into it, a thousand different sounds of confusion and excitement and

cries so plentiful that they converge into one thing so loud it makes my ears ring.

And then, as they run at us, the high-pitched whine gets so loud it bursts into silence. It's like when you watch a bomb explode in a movie, and then an unsettling quiet sweeps in. But I can't be bothered to think about how unnerving it is, because I'm not feeling much of anything as we watch the scene unfold, running against the traffic.

The first few women don't even spare us a glance, sprinting straight for the front door that has been left wide open, letting the low afternoon sun filter into the center of the room to illuminate the dust motes drifting through the air.

Just like my ears couldn't distinguish their noises, my eyes can't pick any identifying features about them. I just know that there are a few of them, and they run out without hesitation, not bothering to glance at Kaia or me.

One woman turns to look behind her as she runs, and with my eyes focused on the dozens of heads behind her, I don't see her until she rams square into my chest. The force knocks her backwards, and her eyes round with shock, but she moves quickly around me, and I obviously don't stop her.

It's Kaia who brings me back to myself, wrenching her hand free of mine. Some doors stand completely open, and others sit just a little ajar, the locks clearly disengaged, but the inhabitants less trusting of the circumstances. I don't hear what Kaia says—I still feel like a bomb exploded at my feet—but I see her point at me, and I meet the eyes of the woman in the cell. They're electric blue, brilliant and wild against her dark skin, and just like that, she shocks me into action.

"Everyone out!" I say quickly, using my arm to motion toward the door. There's a sudden scurry as people hurry to comply with my demand, the guard's uniform making them believe it would be wise to follow my orders.

More doors open, and women stream out of them, some without sparing me a glance and others without ever taking their eyes off me, like I may attack once their backs are to me. I don't spare them any further attention, moving to the back of the hall, ushering more people out of cells, calmly and firmly telling everyone to get out.

When I reach the end of the hall and turn back, it seems like I've walked a mile. The air feels thick and the light from the other side seems so far. I can't see Kaia anymore between the sea of bodies frantically moving,

running into one another, some embracing, others pushing their way to the front.

I feel faint, remembering my first time visiting cells like these. There are so many more here than there ever were back then, but the setup is similar, the disdain is identical. Bare cells with dirty mattresses haunt me, reminding me of the feel of being slumped on one of them, feeling her move up and down on me, leaving my cock covered in her blood and my cum.

I try to move back to the exit, but my feet feel as heavy as the air, and I stumble. At the last minute, I grab hold of the bars of a cell, keeping me from going down, and stare at the ground, trying to breathe. It isn't the memory itself that hurts. I was drugged, and even though I hadn't wanted Genevieve, I'd thought in the moment that I was with the woman I loved. But everything that comes after that?

That fucking hurts.

Davos telling me my father had raped her before she did the same to me, telling me that we breed our soldiers, Genevieve showing up at my doorstep, her telling me she was pregnant, and then telling me…

I struggle to breathe through my lungs that feel like they've been crushed into powder dust, and glance up to see movement in the cell opposite me. It's a flash of silver hair as the occupant tries to hide, tucking it into her knees and letting it curtain over her face.

Having someone else to focus on dulls the pain the way it always does, and I drag myself up, pulling fresh air into my lungs. "You have to leave." I say, rapping my knuckles on the bars to try and grab the girl's attention. She doesn't move so much as an inch—she's gone on the defensive like a turtle that crawled inside its shell.

Except, she's still vulnerable.

"I won't hurt you." I say, speaking louder. "But you have to get out. Now!"

She still doesn't react, and the hall is clearing out before us, the sound receding with the tide of bodies. We're running out of time until we get discovered, and I can't have a plane full of escapees and my crew waiting for me to convince this girl to come. I know better than to use force, but I have to at least get closer to her so that she has no choice but to listen to me.

I enter the cell slowly, cautiously, with my hands raised to show her I haven't come to harm her. But even when I step right in front of her, she

doesn’t look up to see me, and she gives no indication that she knows I’m here, so I drop down to her height and reach an arm out, placing a gentle hand on hers. Unsurprisingly, she stiffens.

“We have to go!” I tell her, my voice losing any bit of the calm façade I may have had before. Or rather, my detachment is starting to wane as the urgency of the situation increases.

We’re definitely blowing past our timeline here. It feels as though I’ve been in this building for ages. I wonder if time works differently here for everyone. If I feel like the last hour has been a week, how must these prisoners feel?

When I’m only ignored again, I sweep the hair out of her face, trying to find the woman’s eyes so that I can appeal to her. Except, when I find them, I realize she’s not a woman.

Her round face is thin from lack of care rather than growing out of her youth, and her wide eyes are full of tears and terror, both of which brim over, leaving paths on her dirty cheeks.

She’s a girl, far too young to be in a place like this. Not that anyone should be in a place like this, the least of which is a damn child. Nausea curls in my stomach and anger lights in my veins, but my mouth twitches into something like a smile. “It’s okay,” I tell her softly, her fear quelling my panic. “But we have to go.”

She only stares at me as she silently cries, her silver hair sticking to her pale face. I glance up, looking for any sign of Kaia, but when I don’t find her, I decide I’m going to have to go off the script here. “It’s okay,” I say again, moving to grab her around the waist.

Her bones are frail and sharp under her skin—I feel every inch of them as I pull her into me. She doesn’t fight against me, for all of her fear, refusing to uncoil even as I lift her into my arms and tuck her against my chest. Her whole body trembles against me, her sharp shins biting into my arm as I wrap one around her and use the other to support her back. She’s lighter than any human should be, I think, but my grip on her is awkward… even more so when I begin to run, tucking her tighter against me.

I don’t slow down to take in any of what is unfolding around me. I don’t look for the faces I recognize, don’t bother trying to distinguish friend from foe. My entire focus is on the girl in my arms and getting her to safety.

When I break out into the courtyard, it is every bit of the chaos that Kent predicted. Right there in the middle of the front lawn is the giant plane we

arrived in. I knew that Kent was going to disable the airspace radar when he tripped the door locks, but something about seeing the great thing in a place it's not supposed to be is bizarre. It almost makes me want to laugh as I stumble through the groups of people standing around, looking confused, scared, suspicious.

Once I spot Rook ushering a group of women to the plane, where Dom helps pull them up into the open cargo space, I feel a little more in control. From the corner of my eye, I catch Kaia, motioning emphatically toward the plane to a group of three women. And beyond them, there's two men rushing at them.

I freeze, preparing to reach for the gun, but the men run past them, hands raised and mostly nude as they run for their escape. Harley motions them onward, up the ramp of the cargo door, and then glances up at me.

"Boudreaux!"

It's Rich, standing there with a rifle in his hand, that spurs me forward, creating a path through the people fighting to get into the plane. They look almost like zombies, desperately trying to get to the living in the plane, to become one of them. They clear a path for me at Rich's request, and I pass the small girl off into Dom's arms. He turns with her, and Harley follows him, leaving Michael and Victor to come fill the space they vacate.

I lock eyes with Victor, registering his shock and horror as Michael begins to take over for Dom, pulling people forward onto the back of the plane one by one. Dimitri moves behind him, passing out blankets and sheets for the survivors to cover themselves. I know that the senator has been in war zones, that he's seen things I haven't, but the look he's fixing me with assures me we're in a nightmare unlike any he's ever witnessed.

He recovers quickly, taking a stack of blankets that Dimitri passes him, draping them around the shoulders of people as they board the plane. Michael passes me a rifle. Now that we've given ourselves away here, I may as well upgrade.

I turn, surveying what's left behind us. The house stands still against a darkening sky, eerily quiet. I grab the pistol too as I walk back toward it, afraid that we're forgetting something… someone.

Where are the masters? And for that matter, where is John?

A young man streaks past me so fast I feel like I'm standing still rather than moving deliberately forward. Kent appears in the doorway, a trickle of

blood running down his forehead. His brow furrows as he takes in the scene before him, and then his gaze cuts to mine. “You get ‘em all?”

“Harley’s supposed to be keeping count. I haven’t seen John?” My statement comes out as a question.

He shakes his head, answering what I didn’t explicitly ask.

Something’s wrong.

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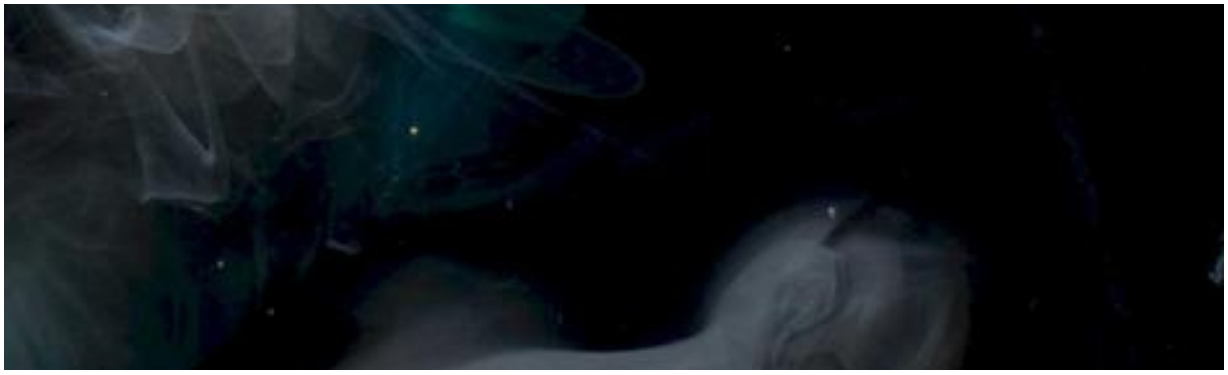

“What about that one?” I suggest, nodding at a girl laughing as she splashes water on her bronze skin. It glistens on her taut stomach, and though her face is obscured by sunglasses, she looks cute.

Moose growls his dissent without even looking up from the book before him, which has a boring title and looks like nonfiction. I have my doubts whether he’s actually reading or just looking at a porn magazine tucked inside it, but every time I look over it’s just to see the cream paper with lots of small words printed on it. I don’t know if they even make porn magazines anymore, now that I think about it.

We’re set up on the beach, just steps away from the vacation home behind us. The water is also close, brought higher by the tide coming in. We’ve been out here all day, again. Just like yesterday. I’ve been as social as I can manage, chatting with old acquaintances and finding what everyone has been up to, what their plans are after graduation, dodging questions about my own plans.

Social work is hardly glamorous, so when I tell people I’m going to apply for the department of Oregon Human Services, their eyes glaze and I get out of getting any deeper into the conversation. Because the truth is, I want to help. I want to do good. But I don’t want to be a part of the same system that failed me. You could argue, I suppose, that I can make the system better by being a worthy advocate, but I don’t really want to make the system better. I want to dismantle it from a distance and replace it with something better. I just haven’t found out what that is yet.

“She’s cute…” I say, trying to tempt him into looking up at the girl I just chose as his potential conquest.

“Bunnies are cute, Monroe. I’m not interested in cute.”

“So, you want someone hot?” I surmise, scanning the beach again.

There’s no shortage of young women who would be glad to hook up with Moose. I’ve seen how they all look at him, throwing heavy glances his way to see if he looks up and their eyes meet. But he never does.

“I don’t want anyone at all, princess. As fun as it is to watch you try to be my pimp, you can give it up. If I wanted to fuck someone, I would.”

I narrow my eyes at him on that, wondering whether he means he’d just take what he wants. “You’re scared of women, aren’t you? That’s it. That’s your big fear.”

I expect to get a wry laugh out of him, but he just meets my gaze. “I already told you, I’m not scared of something I can crush under my boot.”

Maybe it’s the heat or the fact that I’m suffocating myself to try and look like I’m not insane, but his words trigger me more than they should.

“You are such a fucking ass!” I yell, scrambling to my feet to get away from him. He is maddening. He has been from the start, but I keep having these moments where I think I can trust him, where I think we could be friends. And then he goes and says something that just reminds me he is another man who takes what he wants, says what he wants, and does what he wants without regards for how it affects anyone else.

“And yet, you love me.” He calls after me, unbothered.

I’m relieved that he doesn’t follow me into the house. I think by now he’s decided that none of the twelve other occupants of the rental are any kind of threat to us. We’re all just what Rhea said—a bunch of college kids who knew each other before Moose and Eli ever entered our orbit, enjoying the throes of our freedom.

Except, I don’t feel free.

I feel tethered, stuck. And I don’t know what I am stuck to.

No, that’s a lie. I *do* know what I am stuck to.

It’s him.

Remy.

I fucking hate that I still think about him so much, that I think a part of me will always be owned by him. Maybe that’s just what first love is like. Maybe you give your heart to someone, and you get back half of it, and you

learn to live with what's left. If that's the case, it's better not to fall in love. And it's definitely better not to do it often.

Rhea slings an arm around me the minute I step through the back door, pulling me with her to the kitchen. Lucy takes up at my other side, boxing me in.

"What's going on?" I demand, still salty from my dick-ish bodyguard reminding me that all men are the same.

"Don't fight it." Lucy advises, giggling as they lead me around the corner.

"Surprise!"

A chorus of the word smacks me in the face as nearly two dozen people jump up from where they've been hiding behind the massive kitchen island. A banner above it says "happy birthday".

"Happy birthday, Claire!" Rhea yells out above everyone else, letting go of me to take two of the shot glasses lined up on the counter. She presses one into my hand and takes the other herself.

They threw me a surprise party. In the house we've all already been staying in.

I blink, watching her face, which is amused. "Oh, come on." She argues. "You're twenty-one *finally*. We had to do something to celebrate!"

I never did much for birthdays before meeting her, and it still feels weird to take the day to celebrate myself. She's always made a big deal about birthdays, but usually I can talk her into something mild for myself… a fancy dinner, a day at the zoo. I even dragged her to a theme park for my nineteenth and rode a roller coaster for the first time.

But a surprise party feels ridiculous, especially given that we've been partying the whole time we've been here.

I guess there's no getting out of it now. Austin wraps me in a half hug. "Happy birthday!"

"Thanks." I say hesitantly. I haven't been avoiding him, but I also haven't made it a point to be in the same room with him for long. Fortunately, Eli takes his place, edging him out to give me a hug, too.

"Twenty-one." He grins. "That's exciting."

"Is it?" I raise an eyebrow, appraising his assessment. I've been drinking for years without care. I drank so much last summer, I was sober most of the school year. Even now, it isn't doing anything significant. I'd used it as a coping mechanism before, but I'm not about to use it to cope with my

boredom. I'm drinking because I'm here, because it's what's expected, not because it feels like a birthright I've finally inherited.

"You can finally throw away that fake I.D. Skipper made for you our sophomore year." Rhea laughs.

Hearing his name, Skipper looks up at me. "You still have that thing?"

"Of course she does." Rhea laughs. "She just turned twenty-one today! She's needed it all this time."

"That was one of the first fakes I made." Skipper chuckles, combing his hand through his mop of brown curls. "I'm honored that you helped me find my calling in digital design."

"Glad I could help." I tell him, laughing and setting the shot glass, still full, on the counter. "Excuse me."

I take advantage of Rhea's distractedness to slip out of the room, feeling crowded out by these strangers who just want to celebrate with me. It feels wrong to be so uninterested, so unable to accept their care.

I don't want to go back outside, so I slip up to the room I've been sharing with Rhea and dig into my suitcase 'til I find what I'm looking for. I flop onto the bed with the burner phone in hand and power it on, drawing the pillow against my chest.

I haven't figured out how I'm going to shake Moose if and when my anonymous benefactor tells me where Wes is, but that doesn't stop me from praying that he finally came through.

I wonder idly if anyone downstairs has enough sleeping pills to drug a two-hundred-pound Moose. If I just get a good head start, I can get far enough away that they won't be able to find me until I want them to.

When the phone powers on, it flashes with the icon of one new message, and my heart skips a beat.

As much as I want to do this, I'm not stupid. I could be walking right into my own demise, trying to trap him like this. But it's a risk I've decided is worth taking. Too many people hold my freedom in their hands. Too many people are keeping me from figuring my shit out. Wes, Davos, Remy, Moose.

I only want to kill one of them, but I need all the others to stand back and let it happen… or I need to evade them all until it's done.

Tapping on the icon, a series of numbers pops up on my screen, giving me a moment's pause. And then realization sets in that I'm looking at a set of coordinates. I'm just tapping on them to see where they take me when

the door opens. I nearly jump out of my skin to find Moose staring at me from the doorway.

“What?” I demand, covering my misdeeds with irritation.

He raises his hands like he can deflect my attitude. “Just checking on the birthday princess.” He says, his eyes roving over me. I already locked the phone and dropped it on the bed, making no attempt to hide it, which would only look suspicious.

“And I’m just taking a moment to myself.” I force a smile. “You’re interfering.”

That doesn’t bother him, of course. He eases into the room, leaving the door open. “You don’t want the attention?”

“Nope.” I pop my lips. “Despite what you may think, I’m not an attention whore. And those people downstairs are not my friends.”

“Harsh.” Moose chuckles, dropping down on the bed at my side, making me dip with the weight of him on my mattress. He laces his fingers behind his head and leans back contentedly, as if he isn’t overstepping some boundaries right now. “They care about you.”

“They don’t know me.” I snap, moving away from him and sliding the phone onto the pillow on the ground, lest he make a grab for it.

“Do *you* know you?”

“Fuck off, Moose.” I roll off the bed, standing up. “I came here to get away from you, not for a philosophy lesson.”

Moose only grins, rolling over onto his side and propping himself up with an elbow. “No philosophy lesson here, princess. Just curious.”

“Well, don’t be.” I shrug. “Nothing interesting here.”

Almost a year after nearly having a breakdown about my lack of direction in life, I’m still just as lost, a single ship in a vast ocean without a lighthouse to guide me away from the rocks. That realization hurts more than I want to admit.

“I disagree.” Moose says softly. “I think you’re interesting.”

“Do you?” I mock, my voice bitter. “What is it you find so compelling about me? Is it the way I zone out in class and stare into space? Is it the way I’m so social? Or have you fallen for my sparkling personality?”

His soft lips tip into a smirk. “None of the above. You’re just not as bad as you think.”

“Wow.” I simper. “You’re really great at this. You missed your calling as a life coach.”

Moose chuckles, rising off the bed so that he can stand flush with me. “Stop thinking, Monroe. Just start doing.”

“You stopped me when I tried that.” I snap, reminding him of his intrusion on my date.

“I don’t mean stop thinking altogether. And I don’t mean do whatever you want without thinking about the consequences. I mean, stop thinking about who you are and start doing stuff that will make you who you want to be.”

It’s quiet as I stare at him, wondering where the hell that sage advice came from. It is good advice. The only problem is, I don’t really know who I want to be either. But I know who I don’t want to be, and that’s probably a good start.

“It’s not too late to go back to college and switch your major to psychology.” I tell him. “You seem to like messing with people’s heads.”

“I’ve got an engineering degree collecting dust back home.” He grins, waving me off.

Silence falls between us as I contemplate what our relationship is. I’m not interested in him, and I don’t think he’s interested in me. Maybe it’s just the sheer amount of time we’ve spent together over the course of the last few months, but it feels like something has shifted from where we began. I *might* actually have another friend besides Rhea.

“Thank you,” I say finally. “I appreciate you.”

Moose makes a face, looking disgusted. “Ah, that’s it.” He takes a step back, shaking his head. “You’ve discovered my only fear.”

“Being… thanked?”

“Nope. Making me nice.” He shivers to illustrate his point, and I reach for the pillow still on the bed so I can chuck it at his head.

I’d have got him, too, if he didn’t dance out of the way, chuckling as he draws his phone out of his pocket.

I wonder if it’s Remy calling with some ridiculous order for him and almost shout for him to hang up and come back to bed, just to piss Remy off and fuck with his head a little. But the smile slips off Moose’s face, and he tears his eyes from me.

He doesn’t do it before I can see the worry there.

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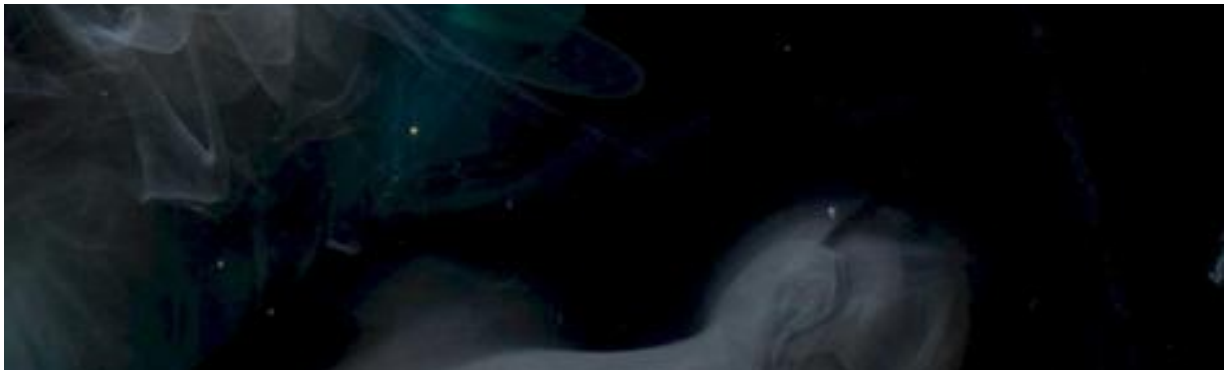

“You’re telling me John Smith was a fucking insider, *not* an informant?” I growl, turning to Kent as we scan the empty fourth floor.

“Michael only told him that we were coming to help break his girl out. He paid a good amount of money for what he thought was a vigilante mission to help him. He didn’t care about the rest of them.”

I drop my head into my hands, massaging the spot between my eyes where a headache is spiking. We don’t have time for this. We killed every one of the guards, including the fucker John Smith who apparently used to work here. But the masters are gone, and there’s no saying if and when they’re coming back.

“Un-fucking-believable.” I growl. “I’ve got to stop trusting Michael.”

“Michael’s got to stop trusting other people.” Kent corrects. “He’s naïve. I had my suspicions about John from when we first heard of him, but when we met earlier today, I could tell there was something wrong about him. He claimed he was in love with his girl, made it out to be some sort of story for the ages, but he just had a favorite victim. After I took out Natalia, I found him waiting for his girl. That’s when he let it slip that he’s been in love with her for years. He didn’t give us all that information because his girl knew it, he gave us that information because he used to be a guard here. He was fired for racking up a debt he couldn’t pay on the salary they gave him and trying to sneak in to see her without paying.”

I don’t bother pointing out the hypocrisy of them firing John, not for raping a girl, but for not paying to do it. “So, did he tip off the masters? Did

you kill him?”

“Slit his throat, killed the guard who came to escort him, stole that guy’s uniform, and told the girl to go back to her cell and wait until someone came for her. I couldn’t exactly tell you all that while we were waiting to kill the other two in the comms room.”

“Jesus Christ.” I mutter. “You did all that in twenty minutes? Remind me to never piss you off.”

Kent grins. “I’ve got your six now, Boudreaux.”

I think that’s an assurance that he won’t kill me for stepping on his toes. “I just wanted to do one last sweep. I’m not sure where the masters are. I don’t think John tipped anyone off, but I want to make sure we got them all. That’s the mission, right, boss?”

Boss?

“It is.” I agree, turning to clear the last room on the fourth floor. It’s empty aside from the various equipment, medieval looking torture devices and tables. Kaia said this was where they did the initiation, and I don’t need to know anything more about what that meant.

I close the door, hustling through the hall back to where Kent is coming out of the one opposite me. He motions for me to precede him going down the steps, and I watch our path forward while he keeps the scope of his gun trained behind us, heading off any surprise attacks.

We clear the third, second, and first floor quickly, both of us eager to get out of this horror show. He checks the women’s cells while I check the men’s, each of us verifying the other’s work.

It’s as we’re stepping back into the outdoors that I see the man standing in the shadows from the corner of my eye. I guess Kent sees him, too, because he pushes me out of the way to take his shot… mere seconds before the bullet whizzes past where I stood thirty seconds ago.

It lodges itself in Kent’s shoulder, but the man goes down before he sees it, half his arm obliterated by Kent’s shot.

“Fuck!” I spit, rushing to check on him. Kent’s face is pulled into a mask of pain, but he shakes me off with a hand pressed to his wound. Blood seeps out from around it, though it’s certainly slowed by the pressure he’s applying to it.

“Go!” I tell him. “I’ve got your six, this time.”

Kent does as he’s told, striding toward the plane, where Victor is waiting with a hand out to pull him forward. My eyes sweep the entire lawn,

looking for any other threat. I'm assuming the man we just put a bullet in was one of the masters, given the lack of a guard's uniform, which means there's still one unaccounted for. But as we make our way to the plane, no one moves except Rich, who spans the distance himself to check on his injured friend.

Dimitri stalks toward me with both gas cans in hand, and we signal to Victor to let the pilot know we'll be going shortly. I don't have to communicate with Dimitri. We act in sync, going opposite directions, pouring the gasoline around the base of the castle.

I noticed enough wood support beams and joists to make burning it down a viable option, but I really want to be sure that the grenade blast obliterates everything. Once we've doused the entire thing, meeting up at the front, I toss the empty can into the open door of the building, letting it bounce and clatter against the flagstone. We set both sides blazing in an instant, and as much as I want to enjoy the bonfire soon to come, we've got a plane full of victims needing medical attention.

We're nearly to the cargo door, Harley motioning for us to hurry, when I hear the shot.

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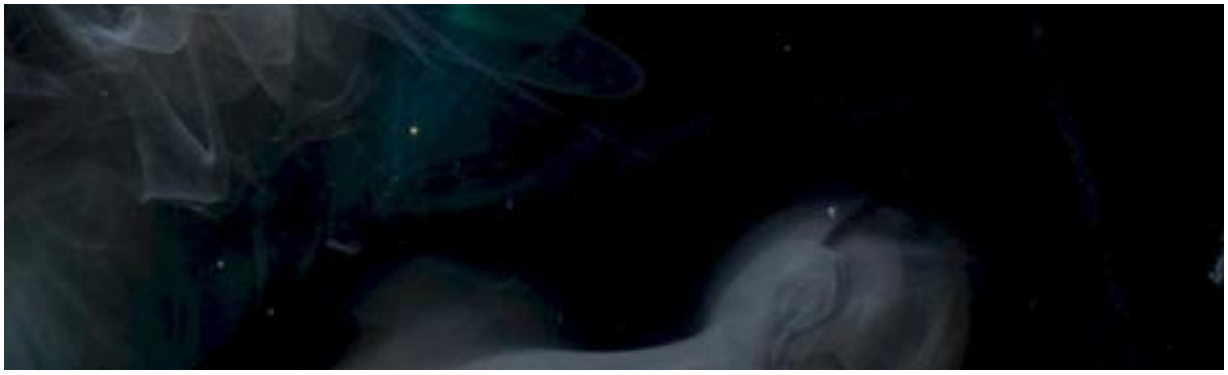

“I have to go.” Moose says, stashing his phone in the pocket of his board shorts without looking at me.

“W-What?” I stutter. “Go where?”

In all the time he’s been my babysitter, he’s never gone further than across the hall from me. And now he’s striding to his room, adjacent to mine and Rhea’s, and gathering his possessions as I follow him like a puppy dog.

“My sister’s in trouble.” He says coldly, drawing a gun out of his bag and checking the ammunition… as if his sister is around the corner and he can run to save her from whatever trouble she’s gotten into.

I decide to swallow my question about how he got that gun on the plane. “Is she okay?”

“Doesn’t sound like it.” He snaps.

“What can I do?” I ask, watching him strip down to his boxers and immediately averting my eyes. He pulls a pair of black jeans up his legs a second later then slips into a tee shirt.

“You can’t do anything. Stay here and enjoy your vacation while I try to go deal with real problems, okay?”

He’s an ass, but I already knew that. It doesn’t stop me from caring, from trying to offer some kind of assistance. “Should I come with you?”

That gets him to stop long enough to look at me, though he doesn’t do it fondly. “No, princess. You’re not my top priority right now. Keep your little

ass here and don’t put yourself in danger so Boudreaux won’t kill me, hmm?”

Something about the way he shut me down makes me feel stupid, but it’s probably just because I’ve been planning to do the exact opposite of what he is telling me to. “Where is your sister?” I ask, wondering if I should drive him. The look in his eyes is wild, erratic. He probably shouldn’t be driving right now. He’s a menace on a good day.

“Vegas.” He says shortly.

“Vegas?” I repeat. I’ve never been, but Nevada is several states away… and time zones. Moose can’t drive there himself.

“Claire?” He stops, looking at me, exasperated. “Do me a favor?”

“Anything,” I say, before realizing I actually mean it.

“Stay safe. I’ll call Boudreaux from the road and let him know to send a replacement, but until you have one, it’s not the time to be petty. Got it?”

There’s a lot of things I want to say, most of which are petty, so I sigh and nod.

“Good girl.” He nods, patting me on the head like a dog he’s just told not to destroy the house while he’s gone. He’s taking his phone out again as he turns, leaving me there like that’s it.

I follow him to the front door with my arms crossed, watching as he hefts the single bag in one hand and speaks into his phone in what I think is a foreign language. I had no idea he was bilingual.

There’s already a car waiting at the end of the long drive, and Moose stalks toward it without hesitation, leaving me to watch him, bewildered, as he opens the trunk and swings his bag in before slipping into the passenger seat. He doesn’t even look back at me before the car pulls away from the curb.

“Everything okay?” Rhea asks, popping her head through the door behind me.

“Moose had an emergency.” I tell her, unease tugging at my stomach. I hope his sister is okay.

“Damn.” Rhea says quietly. “I guess that means Austin will have to be your partner for beer pong.”

I turn around to tell her she’s got to figure out her priorities, but the smile on her face disarms me. Last year was the only time I’ve ever seen her not being her chipper self, and I *hated* it. I hated that I was part of the reason for it.

“*Stop thinking about who you are,*” Moose had said, “*and start doing stuff that will make you who you want to be.*”

For tonight, one last time, I’ll be who my best friend needs me to be. And in the morning, I’ll take the first step toward becoming who I *want* to be.

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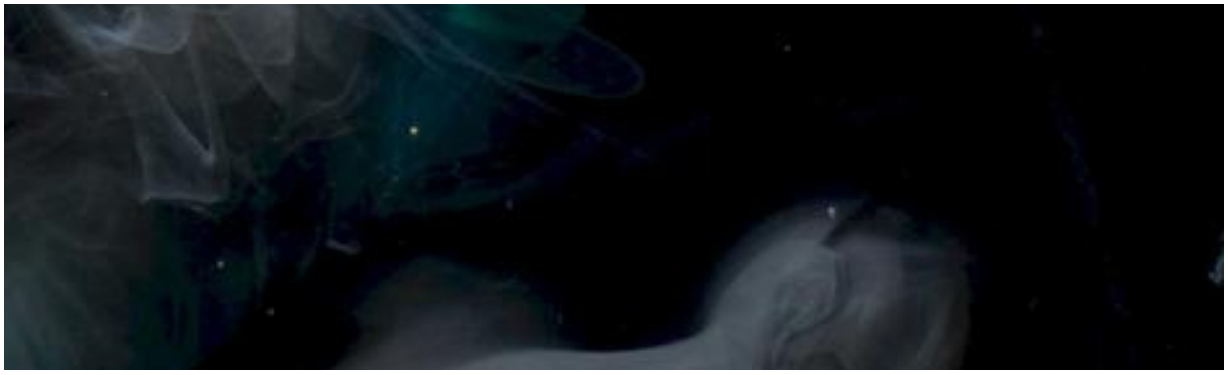

The pilot doesn’t stop for the gunshot, perhaps not knowing it came from inside the plane. As soon as we clear the threshold, he starts to move, the wheels bouncing over the uneven terrain.

Victor’s eyes are wide as he presses a cloth against Kaia’s neck, assessing her pulse with his fingers on her wrist. He’s talking to her, but I don’t know what he is saying. All around us, captives are shaking, rocking, crying, singing to try and block out the sounds of the ones crying.

“Kaia!” I drop to my knees at her side, and Kaia’s dark eyes slide to mine, though they’re rapidly emptying. I don’t need to feel her pulse to see the life leaving her. “What the fuck happened?” I demand, glancing up at Victor for an answer.

“She headbutted me,” Dom says, holding his bleeding nose. “Grabbed the gun I holstered and pointed it at someone.”

I look through the fray for whoever Kaia would have shot, and for who shot her. Harley and Michael are holding another woman down a few feet away, and all around us, everyone has scattered to make space. I turn my attention back to Kaia, seeking an explanation, but she’s faded too fast. Her lips move, but I can’t hear what she’s saying, so I drop my ear closer to her mouth, trying to hear her final words.

Her blood soaks the white shirt that I gave her and it’s splashed upon her lips, which just brush my ear as she makes out a single word.

Mistress.

“Mistress?” I ask, pulling away to see her face, checking for any signs that I heard her right. But her eyes are rolling back, losing life. When Victor slumps and takes his hand from her neck, realizing it’s too late to help her, I move forward, trying to shake her awake.

“Remy.” Dimitri says, placing a hand on my shoulder to give me pause long enough to realize there’s a plane full of people watching me with terror in their eyes. But they’re used to being scared. They can tolerate a moment more while I get to the bottom of what just happened.

I stand, closing the distance to where Harley and Michael are holding back a squirming woman, who looks positively desperate to get away from them. Her eyes go wide as she sees me approaching, and her fight doubles, desperate to get away from me.

“She shot her.” Harley says definitively, answering the question I didn’t have to ask. The little revolver on the floor next to her tells me all I need to know. It’s a gun much like the one Natalia tried to pull on Kent.

“Mistress?” I say, appraising her to see if she reacts to that.

“I think it was self-defense.” Michael says, looking bewildered at Harley and then me. “Right?”

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “Kaia was going to shoot in self-defense. Wasn’t she, *mistress*?”

The woman snarls at me, muttering in a guttural foreign language. I pull her forward, my crew moving away to let me haul her up by a handful of her dirty hair. The blanket falls away from her, revealing her soft nude body, mostly unmarred, and not at all as sharp as most of the others.

“This is your mistress?” I ask, waiting for any of the stunned captives to make eye contact long enough to give me an answer. When no one does, I spin her around, making sure everyone gets a good look. “Is this one of your captors?”

“Yes.”

It’s a man who speaks up, his voice shaking like he’s afraid of what this woman will do to him for admitting that.

I scan the crowd, looking for someone else to confirm what I already know to be true. We only found *one* of the masters because we were foolishly looking for men. We didn’t anticipate one of them being a woman, and we didn’t anticipate one of them hiding among their prey and posing as their own victims.

My eyes fall on the girl I carried from the cells, who's standing with a blanket wrapped around her that looks thick enough to make her lose balance. "She is one of them." She confirms, her voice quiet but unwavering.

There's an eruption of whispers that I don't stop to listen to. Everyone parts ways as I drag the mistress through the plane, toward the raised cargo door. We've lifted off the ground a little and I can feel the climb as the pilot pushes us higher, eager to get us into open air and out of a war zone.

The mistress attempts to appeal to me, pleading in a fusion of languages, begging, her tears spilling down her face as she twists and turns in an attempt to free herself from me. But as I push her ahead of me, I see the tattoo… the same one Wes wears, the one my father had, the one tattooed on the back of my upper arm so I never have to look at it.

The bird with a crown poised in its talons.

She's one of them.

Or, she *was*.

Because she's gone as soon as I heft her over the side of the door, throwing her out by her skinny neck.

We're too high up to hear the sound she makes when she hits the ground. But I know it comes when her scream is abruptly cut off, and a moment later, Rich pulls the pin on the grenade.

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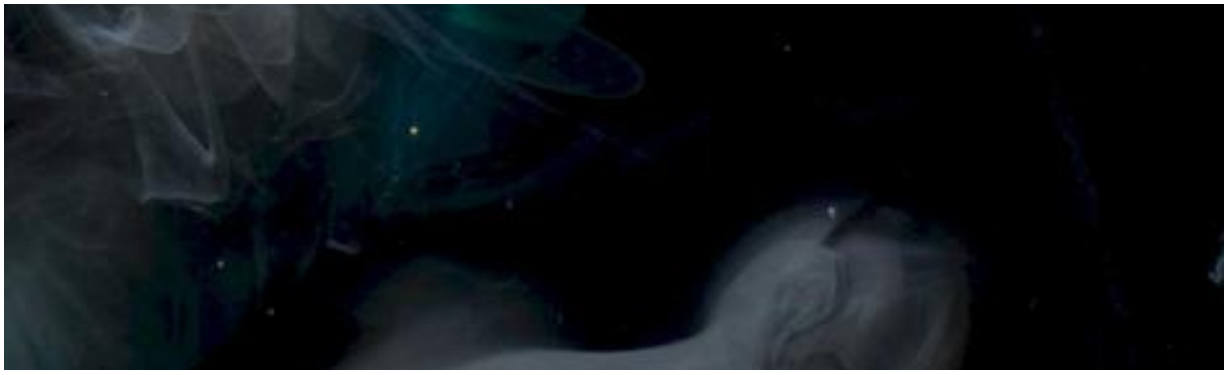

I left the house when it was still dark out and was on the plane before the sun even rose. I left a note for Rhea on my bed, figuring I had hours until she woke and read it. And when she reads it, I'm hoping she doesn't do anything rash.

Moose leaving so abruptly is the best thing that could have happened to me, given that I finally have an address from my mystery benefactor. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about him… or I guess, more appropriately, his sister.

I sent him a text before I turned my phone off, just asking him to let me know if everything is okay once he gets there. I'll likely never even get an answer since I intentionally left that phone stashed in the seatback pocket of my first flight. I have the burner from Dimitri, which he gave me so that I wouldn't be tracked, but I'm not putting it past him to have some sort of tag on that one, too. I also don't trust myself to turn it on without calling Rhea to assure her I'm fine. Her number is the only one I have memorized; I could call her right now and make sure she isn't pulling her hair out. I'm sure she's already called four or five times—at least once for every hour she's been awake.

But I have to do this for myself. I can't move on when I'm still stuck in the past, even just a little. It's why I've been hunting Wes down—or rather, why I've been paying someone to hunt Wes down for me.

After he disappeared from the veterinarian's office in Costa Rica, where I literally saved his fucking life, he stayed missing. Part of me hoped he was

dead in an alley somewhere, but a greater part of me hoped he made it. It's a selfish part of me, really, because that hope has nothing to do with him and everything to do with me. I want him alive because if he is, he can help me trap his father.

I considered, early on, just going straight for the head of the beast. I looked up pictures of what he looked like—his face is all over the internet as a benevolent donor, a wealthy investor, a 'brilliant entrepreneur working to make the world a better place', one large donation at a time. The more praise I saw for the man, the more my bloodlust for him grew. But I'm not trying to go on a suicide mission.

Even if I don't know what I'm living for, I want to live.

And more importantly than that, I don't want to fail at taking him down.

If I fail at killing Alexandre Davos, I will fail every one of his victims. I don't know how many there are, I just know that Remy made it sound like there were a lot. Just like I couldn't kill Giante just for myself, I can't go after Davos just for my own revenge. But I can go after him for what he did to Remy, to Rhea in an off-handed way, to their mother, to Monica and who knows how many others. And I can go after him even for what he did to Wes.

Monsters aren't born; they're made. And it seems Davos finds as much pleasure in making monsters as he does in destroying innocence.

I'm taking a gamble here that Wes will actually help me. Aside from the fact he didn't seem to have much love lost for his father, he does owe me. I'm just not sure he'll see it that way.

I'm about to find out, though. I glance ahead to the driver's GPS, which shows that the destination is just ahead on the right. I think she's been trying to talk to me, making idle conversation the whole way from the mall she picked me up at. I suppose it may have seemed a bit strange, picking up a woman alone outside the sporting goods store in the afternoon with no bags. It's probably even stranger that I haven't really talked to her, and that I used the cashier's phone to order this car, but she seems undeterred by my silence. I'm not trying to be a bitch, I just don't have the mental capacity to stay focused on what I'm about to do *and* make small talk with her.

When she pulls up to the big brick house, I'm not surprised that it's a miniature mansion. Of course, even on the run, Wes has to hide in style. I wonder if this house belongs to him or his father, or if he's just renting it

from a friend… or if he broke in, killed the homeowners, and has taken the place for himself.

It seems unassuming, honestly. Nothing about it looks like it's owned by a criminal mastermind… there's an American flag mounted by the white garage door, and flowers planted around a mailbox. When I thank the driver and walk to the front door, there's even a floral welcome mat on the doorstep.

The doorbell camera blinks at me, and I get the 'something is wrong' feeling in the pit of my stomach. It's so much easier to feel in control when I have people behind me who won't let me fail.

But I've come this far.

Besides, I'm not fucking scared of Wes.

The blade I bought at the mall is tucked against my hip, a little extra peace of mind. I might have bought a gun if they sold them, though I don't know how to actually use one. They seem better for making people compliant, but I'm comfortable with the knife.

And I am going to make him compliant, one way or another.

I've just rung the doorbell when one of the big black doors opens, and a man stands there in a navy suit, his eyes running quickly over me. He's an unassuming man, neither attractive or unattractive, and he doesn't let any emotion show on his face, whether he's surprised to see a strange girl on the doorstep or not. He's just… there.

"Hello," he says, his eyes studying my face.

I hesitate, wondering if maybe I entered the address wrong. "I'm looking for Wes." I say, realizing that I don't know if he has the same last name as his father. Everybody calls Alexandre Davos by his surname, to the point I nearly forgot *Davos* wasn't his proper name.

"Yes, yes," the man says, looking mildly annoyed now. So, he *does* have emotions. "Come inside. He's down in the basement."

"The basement?" I nearly laugh, taking a small step backwards. "Who are you? His butler?"

The man looks at me with irritation written over every inch of his face—he's middle-aged, probably closer to his fifties than not and with black hair that's obviously been dyed to hold onto an illusion of youth. He looks like he wants to be somebody important, not like the kind of man who would be comfortable with a life of servitude. And he sets alarm bells off in every

part of me, so I take another step back, my heel catching on the first of three stone steps that led to his porch.

I want to call the car back and abandon this plan, but I don't have the app on the phone in my pocket, which is currently a useless brick since I neglected to turn it back on. So, I reach for the other pocket, letting my fingers smooth over the blade there. I can wrap them around it in an instant and draw it against him if I have to… and I might have to.

The man takes another step forward, raising his hands. "He's been staying in the basement… he's in hiding, after all."

I glance out of the corner of my eyes, trying to gauge the distance to a neighbor's house. They're close enough that I can see them, but also far enough apart that all I can see of them is the shapes.

"Right…" I say. "Why don't you send him up here so we can talk?"

The man laughs, coming closer still as I take the last step down to the driveway.

That's when the doorbell chimes.

The voice that comes over the intercom is decidedly feminine, and also full of confusion. "Honey?" She asks, causing the man's entire body to still. He tilts his head just an inch, refusing to take his eyes off me. He also doesn't say anything, his jaw clamped shut so tightly that I can see the muscle twitch. "Hello? Honey, are you out there? The doorbell detected motion."

The man lifts a finger to his lips, and his eyes are full of warning as he cautions me to stay silent. Based on the all-American home and the woman calling him honey, I'm assuming it's his wife. And based on the fact that he immediately tried to lure me to his basement, I'm guessing Wes isn't really here and someone set me up.

"Honey? Are you okay?"

My eyes cut back to the doorbell camera. We have one of those on our apartment, and I know well enough that it can't see us from this position. It's why the stranger is trying to make me stay silent. Whoever is watching him on the doorbell, he doesn't want them to know he's here… or that I'm here.

My options are so limited that I'm not sure any decision is a good one, but I have to do something. I don't know what this man's play is, but I'll put him in check however I have to.

He doesn’t expect me to run at him, and that gives me the advantage I need to sprint past him and up the steps before he can get his hands out to grab me.

“Help!” I yell, dashing to the doorbell camera and beating it with my fist to try and raise some alarm for the woman watching, wherever she is. “Call the police!”

I’ve just closed my fingers around the blade in my pocket when the man’s weight slams into me, knocking me against the wall and pinning my arm to my side as he grinds my face into the brick.

Something wet trickles down my lip as pain explodes across my face. The crunch tells me I may have just broken my nose.

“Stupid bitch.”

The growl in my ear is almost an echo of my own thoughts. This *was* a stupid decision, trusting a stranger to help me find the man I’m looking for. It was a desperate decision, but that’s exactly what I’ve been these last few months… desperate.

I’m struggling to breathe, my chest being squeezed too tight and my bloody nose not letting air pass, but I’ve still got the knife in my hand, waiting to get the leverage to use it.

“Daddy?”

The small voice that speaks is so shocking, I don’t even take advantage when the man freezes, his body going slack against mine.

“Hey, pumpkin.” He says, his voice syrupy sweet and betraying nothing of the venom with which he just called me a stupid bitch.

The voice is obviously coming from the camera—I wonder how much she can see right now. He’s pushing me further into the corner, trying to get me out of view, and it gives me the leverage to use my arm, just enough to slip the knife out of my pocket. A heavy hand on the back of my neck keeps me from moving, but he’s trying to make me eat the brick wall, grinding my face against it in an effort to keep me silent.

“Where’s your mommy, baby?”

“She’s in the kitchen. Want me to take the phone to her?”

“No!” The man blurts out. “Don’t go to mommy. I have to go to work right now, so I can’t talk, but I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Okay,” the girl agrees.

“Go back to watching your videos, okay pumpkin?”

“Okay, daddy!” she says excitedly.

“I love you, pumpkin!”

“I love you, too, daddy!” There’s a moment as I get a small amount of leverage and draw air into my lungs to cry for help, but then he grips the back of my head and presses me harder into the wall, the rough brick scraping at my skin. “So, anyways, bye!” His daughter rushes out.

It takes a minute for the man to relax, but then he seems assured that his daughter has quit watching, because he yanks me toward him by my hair. “You like to do things the hard way, don’t you, Claire?” He growls, wrapping an arm around my neck and one under my ribs, lifting me off the ground.

I seize my chance, stabbing him in the arm. I’m not going for depth right now, so as he howls in pain, I pull the blade out and stab him again, higher this time as his grip on me falters. He cries out again, a pathetic bleating sound like a sheep, but it rolls into a growl as he says “You definitely like things the hard way.” He’s just got me by the arm around my neck, now, constricting my air even more as he squeezes like a python trying to crush its prey.

And there is no mistake that I am the prey. Whatever this man wants with me, it’s not good. He confirms as much when he hoists me over the threshold and slams his door shut with a fancy shoe. I’ve pulled the blade out, ready to stab him a third time—I’ll stab him as many times as I have to—but I can’t find purchase, so I wave it around blindly, hoping to catch him beneath it.

I’ve got no leverage, my feet still dangling above the ground as he moves with me ahead of him toward a set of white double doors. I don’t want to know what’s waiting on the other side of them, and my chances at escape are diminishing rapidly. I fight him every step he takes, trying to wriggle out of his grasp so I don’t end up trapped on the other side of his door.

But instead of opening them up, he throws me against one, letting me take in deep, greedy breaths of air through my mouth as he pins me there with his own weight. “You’re really pretty with all that blood.” He pants, seizing both wrists at the same time.

My free hand, he immobilizes above me as he twists my other arm so sharply that I cry out in pain. “Drop the knife, baby. You can’t really think you stand a chance against me.”

I have no idea who this man is or who he thinks he is, but I stood a chance against Wes, even before Remy saved me. I sure as hell stand a

chance against this guy, and I'm not willing to believe otherwise. I hold it tighter, refusing to open my fingers.

The blood that covers us could be mine, or his, or both. It coats the hand that I can see about to rip my shoulder out of the socket, but I can't look at my arm twisting back at an angle it definitely isn't supposed to be capable of without feeling sick.

"Lucky for you, I like doing things the hard way." He laughs, letting go of me so suddenly that the tears in my eyes turn from pain to relief.

It doesn't last as he smirks at me, and then he balls his hand into a fist and sinks it right into my stomach.

The force knocks the air from my lungs, and I gasp in agony as I fold into myself… into him. The knife falls from my hand, clattering on the marble floor, as he pulls me against him, hoisting me over his shoulder.

Everything went black for a moment, though I didn't pass out. I can still hear him, still feel the pain, still think… I just can't see.

When my vision returns, I realize maybe I just squeezed my eyes shut too tight. Whatever happened, I see the receding form of the upstairs as he jostles me down the steps.

At the bottom, he reaches for something hanging from the ceiling. I assume it's the light switch, until I feel the chain slip around my neck.

Panic consumes me as he throws me off of him and I imagine being hoisted up until my neck breaks. But he doesn't mean to hang me… at least, not yet. I know, because the slip around my neck doesn't pull taut when I land in a heap on the cold basement floor. He's already looping a smaller one around my wrists, taking advantage of my panic at choking to bind them together over my head.

The force pulls my shoulders up until it feels like they'll be ripped from the socket, and I cry out in pain as it tugs me backward.

I can see the outline of him because of the minimal light left from the open door above us, and I know he's watching me as I get to my knees, trying to find the energy to stand.

"I like that you prefer things the hard way." He laughs, though I can't make out his face through the dark. "Just like your mother."

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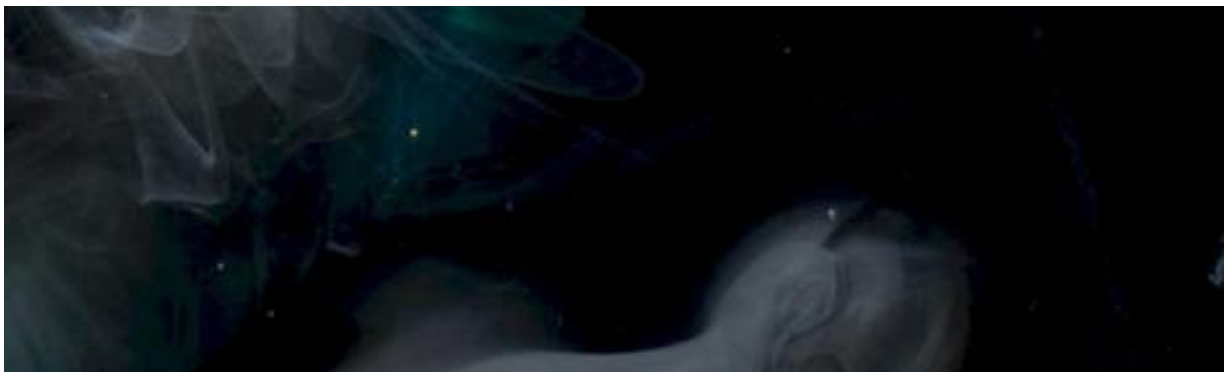

I thought freeing sixty of Davos' prisoners would make me feel accomplished. I thought it would fulfill some small part of me.

I thought wrong.

In the week since our escape, I haven't felt any more at peace than I did before we saved them. I don't regret it, of course, but I didn't expect to feel as empty *after* as I did before. An unexpected consequence of saving so many lives was exposing myself to all the horrors they witnessed… and they witnessed a lot of horrors.

Even if I wanted to, I couldn't open my home to sixty strangers, so we did the next best thing. We bought a hotel.

Senator Massarini insisted on making a personal contribution, so he contacted some counselors and therapists and paid them a hefty fee to sign an NDA and live in a hotel room until an indeterminate time. He and his wife had to get home to their children, which Elaine was extraordinarily grateful for. She seemed over his wife's presence from the moment she showed up. I could tell that Victor wanted to do more, but family comes first. I get that.

Rook, Dom, and Harley have taken charge of organizing the chaos at the hotel, Elaine has spent nearly every waking minute cooking and cleaning there, Kent and Rich have been running security to ensure nothing gets out of hand, and Michael and Dimitri have put themselves in charge of ensuring that no one finds them.

My house has been quiet. It’s unsettling— the kind of quiet that makes you think there’s something around every corner. It’s the kind of quiet that makes your thoughts sound like screams. I’ve been avoiding the refugees, despite my team telling me that some of them have asked about me. Facing them feels like admitting failure… again.

It’s why I’ve already moved onto the next storehouse, even though the rest of the team is already reeling to deal with what we’ve done so far. They tried to talk me out of it, but I need this. It’s why I’m on the jet, headed to a little stone chapel that was abandoned by the church fifteen years ago when the whole town of Vieja Oaxaca disappeared. The landmarks are all still there, but all of the townspeople left it long ago. It’s the perfect place for a monster like Davos to hide his victims.

Kent sits across from me, silent as he looks out the window. I insisted I could do this alone, but he insisted that Rich could handle security for the refugees. I think at this point Kent would follow me into Hell if we thought his wife was there.

I want to tell him we’ll find her, but how do you find someone who doesn’t exist? How do you find someone whose identity was stripped and deleted as if they were never there at all?

I understand why he’s willing to go to the end of the earth to find her. I’d do the same for Claire. I was lucky that Rhea woke me up when she noticed she was gone. If she hadn’t, Claire would have been on a plane to God only knows where, and I may have never known it was Jovich who facilitated her abduction.

Just thinking about it puts a fire in my veins. I still intend to find my predatory half-brother and make him pay for what he did to her. I didn’t kill Wes when I first had the chance because I wanted to use him as leverage, but that was a mistake. I never needed the leverage—I just needed to go out on the hunt, just the way I’ve been for the last few weeks. I’ll find Davos eventually, or I’ll die trying. And along the way, I’ll burn down every last one of his safe houses, his torture chambers, and prison camps. And I’ll kill as many people as dare to defy me.

I can feel our descent beginning and know that we’re getting close. In the distance, I can just make out the big stone cathedral. It towers high into the sky, the opposite of his previous sprawling estates. But I know that the reason he chose this place is because of the catacombs beneath the cathedral.

An abandoned city provides protection from prying eyes, but it doesn't make for a good place to invite wealthy men to come visit. This building, which grows as we drop closer to it, is a holding cell. Traders drop their cargo off here and the men in charge of the whole operation make the arrangements for where they will be sent. The catacombs are great for hiding things—people.

We both know, based on what we've figured out about this place, that Kent's wife isn't here. This is a place without electricity, running water, or access to food. It's not meant for long term use, and his wife has been missing for the better part of four years now. The greatest possibility is that she's no longer even alive, but I don't dare tell him that, and he wouldn't dare listen.

We're just landing when my phone rings.

I'm not sure who I expect to see on the caller ID, but it's not Moose. He never calls me—just types up his reports to assure me nothing new has happened, and answers when I call him. I half-expect it to be her again, drunk and missing me. At least then I'd know she's thinking of me as much as I'm thinking of her.

"What?" I say into the phone, not bothering with pleasantries. Moose was never my friend—I bought his loyalty. My pleasantries were never part of the bargain.

"I'm resigning." Moose says abruptly. "I've had a family emergency. I don't know how long I'll be gone, but—"

"A family emergency?" I cut him off, wondering what family he has that doesn't question the sort of work he does. He must be as lonely a bastard as me. "I paid you for a job. The job isn't over yet."

"The job will never be over." His voice is dark. "That girl of yours seems like a magnet for trouble. Maybe get her a leash."

"Watch what you say about her." I snap. "I'm looking for someone to use as target practice."

Moose only chuckles, though there's no humor in the sound. He's been keeping an eye on Claire for me for months, and usually when I call, he isn't this tense. "Is everything okay?" I ask.

"Your girl is fine. She's with your sister. Double fucking trouble."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "I meant you. The family emergency. Anything you need from me?"

“No.” He doesn’t even consider it. “I’ve got this. It’s just something with my sister.”

“Okay,” I agree. That, I understand. “Then I’ll send Dimitri to keep watch of her until you get your stuff worked out.”

He laughs drily. “She’s growing quite fond of me. You sure you want me to go back to her?”

“As long as you know I’ll cut your dick off and feed it to you if I ever find out you put in anywhere near her.”

This time, his laugh is genuine. “I know you didn’t ask for advice, but I’m going to give you some.”

My hand hovers over the end call button, but for some reason, I decide to wait and hear him out.

“She’s not good. Claire.”

“You don’t even know her.” I argue. Rhea is her best friend, and she’s assured me time and again that Claire is just fine. She’s close to finishing her degree, she’s happy, she’s thriving… other than in her dating life, which is very much by my design.

“I know her better than you might think,” Moose argues, “and I’m telling you, she’s not good. I don’t know what the deal is between you two. If you didn’t buy her, then I’m not sure why you care so much… unless you’re in love with her.”

“Fuck off.” I end the call before he can insinuate anything else.

Other than keeping her safe—and celibate—Moose has no connection to her. I don’t need to listen to him talk to me about *feelings*. Honestly, I’m not sure the guy is even capable.

When I look up at Kent, he’s staring right through me.

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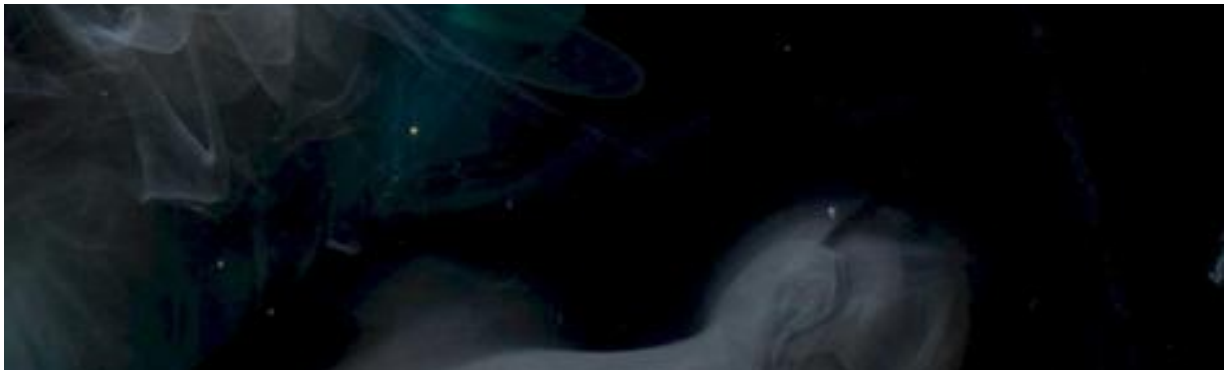

The sunlight filters in through a hole in the stained-glass mural, casting a prism of colors around our feet and bathing us in a gauzy sort of light.

Something about this place is unsettling in a way different from the other places we've been. Maybe it's because we started in the catacombs, and they were so empty I'm not sure there's so much as a spider in any of the webs. It wasn't a comforting emptiness, though. There's something in the air— a heavy sorrow that seems to try and climb down my throat to suffocate me from the inside out.

People died here. Even if they went on to live through further atrocities, *this* is the place where their former lives officially came to an end. Once you're traded here, there's no hope of finding you. You've already been deleted from your country's servers, as if you never existed at all.

We could wait. I don't know how long it will be until the next drop comes, but I don't have anywhere that I need to be. Kent and I could wait in hiding, catch them off guard when the next crew lands here to offload their cargo. Simon would have to move the plane, of course, to not give us away, and maybe stop at the nearest grocer to get us food and water so we could hold out, but I'm considering bringing it up to them as our flashlights bounce through the dark spaces that are untouched by the sun.

We've already checked the catacombs, the chapel, the atrium. All that's left to do is climb the spiral, stone stairs that tower upwards in a tight circle.

I gesture Kent toward them, and he sweeps the scope of his gun with the flashlight mounted on top toward me, illuminating the space beyond what

mine reaches.

There's a little sound—a gasp or a sigh—and I look up just in time to catch a flash of her as she moves, her blonde hair whipping around the curve of the wall.

My heart pounds in my chest, bile rising to the back of my throat as my brain tries to contend with what I just saw. It was just a flash, but it wasn't a trick of the light or a figment of my imagination.

It can't be.

I feel like I've just seen a ghost, every hair on the back of my neck standing at attention. I've got to be seeing things.

But the way Kent moves toward me tells me he absolutely saw someone there too, and his motion launches me forward.

I take the steps as fast as I can, pushing myself up as the tower curves higher, Kent right at my feet.

I want to yell for her to come back, to entreat her to return to me, but I can't risk alerting anyone that we're here. Our boots on the stairs already give us away enough, but we've both got our guns at the ready, prepared for whatever we face at the tops of the steps.

When my legs are burning and my chest feels like it may collapse with the panic and exhaustion, we finally reach the top of the steps and land in an empty room. Kent stops behind me, but I push forward, looking for her.

The gun slips from my hands, hanging by the strap around my shoulder, but it hinders my motions as I run to the other end of the room, looking for any place she could be hiding. I toss it to the ground, not caring right now if I get shot by some sneak attack.

She had to have come up here… there's nowhere else she could have gone. "Claire!" I yell, my voice edged in hysteria even to me.

This can't be happening. *She can't be here*.

I just talked to Moose two hours ago—he assured me that she was safe, with Rhea. She's supposed to be in Florida, not Mexico, but I know what I saw.

It was her.

"Claire!" I scream, pushing against the walls, looking for any sort of hidden door, any place she could be hiding. I scan every inch of the room, certain that she's here somewhere.

"Boudreaux!" Kent calls, loudly enough that I realize this must not be the first time he's called out to me.

I turn to face him, lungs full of panic that feel like they may drown me.

"You saw her!" I yell, not appreciating that he's looking at me like a crazy person. "You saw her run up these steps! Where did she go?"

"I don't know," Kent says, scanning the room, looking for any sort of sign that may betray her hiding spot.

And, of course, he finds it… a trap door in the floor. His light flashes from me to the notch in the ground—just large enough to slip a few fingers into and lift. He raises a hand to his lips, cautioning me against saying anything else, but I can't speak anyway. My chest is constricting, my lungs unable to take in air. Air isn't what I need right now; I need her.

We move together, slow and steady steps, and then I drop to my knees, lifting the floorboards. They move on a hinge, letting light into the darkness below, but at first all I see is an expanse of empty space, void of light.

But then I catch a glimpse of her eyes shining in the shadows.

"Claire!" I jump into the space, unsure how large it is, and move toward her. As I step deeper, Kent moves behind me to help illuminate the space ahead of me, and for one second, I see her again. Lit by the beam of Kent's flashlight, that blonde hair curtains her face, hiding her from me.

"It's okay!" I tell her, moving slowly just in case she's scared by sudden movement. I don't know what the hell happened, but I'm assuming Moose lied to me, which means I have no clue how long she's been here… or what sort of horrors she may have endured.

"I'm here."

I'm reaching out a hand for her to take on her own when Kent's light disappears, plunging me in darkness again. She moves as soon as it happens, knocking me backward so that my head collides with the bottom of the trap door as she scrambles past me, out into the space above. I recover quickly, getting a hand on her ankle, praying my touch won't set her off.

I have no idea what happened, but I suddenly feel like I had a stroke or slipped into a nightmare. How she ended up here, what might have happened to her, why I had no clue she was here… it all evades me as I pull myself upward after her and trap her body against mine.

She fights me, thrashing back and forth, kicking her legs, trying everything she can to dislodge me, so that my continuous string of "*it's okay, it's me*" falls on deaf ears. She's going to hurt herself if she doesn't

stop, and maybe she can't hear me, so I brace one hand on the ground and the other on her shoulder, rolling her over to face me.

Her eyes aren't as bright as they were the last time I saw her—they look empty, and they're cold as I pin her wrists above her head, flattening her entirely against the ground to immobilize her as I promise her that everything is okay now, over and over again, a stream broken only by occasional apologies as she slowly begins to give up the fight.

I want answers, but I don't even know which questions to ask yet… they flood my brain, and the adrenaline is leaving my veins, making room for the horrible reality.

Her eyes aren't the only thing that's different; there's a scar on each corner of her mouth, a thin line curving upward, ending with an X on her cheekbones. The scar is faint, drawn by a thin blade—I probably wouldn't notice it if we weren't under this exact light, with me on top of her.

She holds my gaze, sees the horror in my eyes as I take in the scars—not new, but not quite old. My heart thunders and my head is dizzy with the implication that she's been stuck in hell for far longer than I've known about it. And why haven't I known about it?

I reach out a hand to run a finger over one of the scars, and my heart shatters in my chest as she screams under me, her fight renewed.

She's still beautiful—devastatingly so—but sad and scared and permanently disfigured. Her sweet face has been marred by someone who wanted her to suffer, not just when they held the blade to her skin, but every time she caught a glimpse of herself after.

"Who did this?" I demand, my voice shaking as I try to get her to listen to me, to relax, to realize that I would never hurt her.

The arms that wrap around me grab me from under mine, and I fight to toss them off, not caring if I get hurt in the process. But while one set of arms hauls me backwards, another reaches for her, pulling her toward them, away from me.

When she stands, and I'm hauled to my feet, I see the man she throws herself against, the man who she thinks is her safe space.

Wes.

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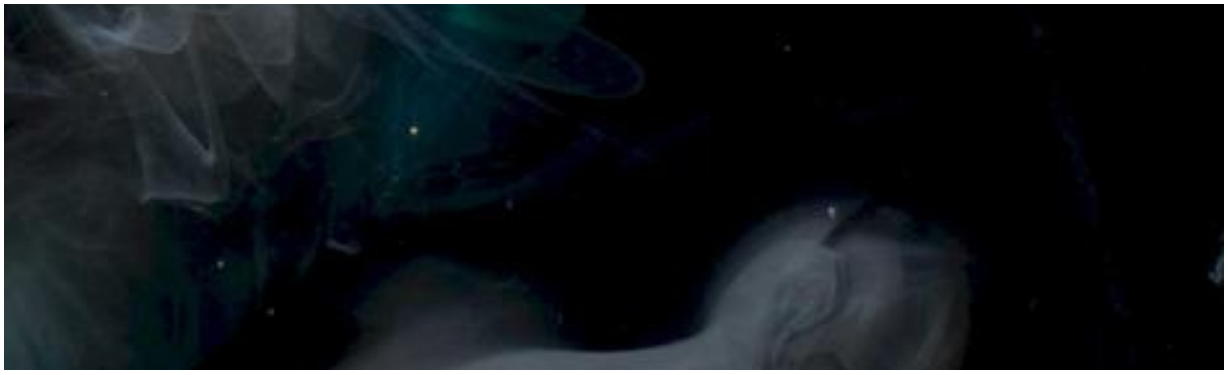

“Are you back, little brother?” Wes says, snapping his fingers in front of my face. When I blink, he nods approvingly. “Good. Thought I’d have to throw you in the looney bin for a moment, there. It’s like your brain just… snapped.”

I blink again, breathing through my nose as I try to process what the hell is going on.

Kent’s still got me pressed tight against him, and for a moment, I think I’ve been betrayed. I think he’s helping Wes, that maybe everybody is helping Wes, and that Moose gave Claire over to him months ago and has been stringing me along all this time.

And then Kent’s grip on me eases, and he steps away. “You good?”

Good?

I’m *not* good.

The woman I love is wrapped in the arms of the man who tried to fucking sell her to monsters. No, the man who *did* sell her to fucking monsters.

“What the *fuck*?” I growl at him, seeing that there’s no way to appeal to her right now. She trembles even in his arms, her face buried in his shirt and her fingers curled around his neck, like she’s terrified of being separated from him.

“You must be terribly confused.” Wes laughs. “I’ll be honest, I loved watching you have a mental breakdown right in front of me. I’d have let it play out longer, if it weren’t at the expense of my wife.”

“Your… wife?” I pant, trying not to throw up as the bile churns in my stomach.

Kent’s got the barrel of the gun trained on Wes, and I know he’s a good shot, but there’s not a chance in hell I’m letting him take it when Claire is in his arms. If he hurts her, even by accident, I’ll have to kill him, and then I’ll have to contend with Rich, too.

“God, I would relish this moment so much more if you hadn’t just terrified her.” Wes shakes his head, reaching down to place two gentle fingers under Claire’s chin and tip it up. Her hair falls backwards, cascading down her back, and I realize it’s longer. And the way she’s looking at Wes, like she’d die at his feet if he just asked, makes me nauseous. “Remy, meet Violet. Violet, meet my brother… Remy.”

Claire turns to me, her eyes sweeping quickly over me, and then faces back to Wes, and my whole world shatters this time. I think I’m choking on the shards; my lungs feel like they’re full of glass.

“Claire!” I beg her to look at me again, just long enough so that I can appeal to her sense of logic before he destroys her again. In a dozen tiny ways, she already looks so different from the woman that I remember… the woman who stabbed him through the hand with my kitchen knife, the woman who wanted him to live even after all he did to her.

“Jesus, Boudreaux. How else can I say this to get through to you?” Wes chuckles. “It’s not her.”

When my eyes snap to his, he’s shaking his head. “This is Violet… *not* Claire.”

Violet opens her mouth hesitantly, glancing from Wes to me. When she speaks, her voice is halting, unsure. “Is Claire… *her*?”

“Yes,” Wes presses a kiss to her forehead as he swipes a strand of blonde off of her scarred cheek, and then disentangles himself from her, though he doesn’t drop her hand. She moves with him, at a respectable difference, as Wes approaches me and drops his weight onto the balls of his feet. “This isn’t Claire, brother. Call your girlfriend and find out for yourself.”

I stare at him, wondering what the hell kind of game he’s playing. “What is this?” I demand, looking between the two of them.

He presses a button on his phone and then hands it to me. I look down to see the name on the screen *Claire Monroe*, and take it from him without daring to look away from him in case this is some sort of trick to run off with my girl.

When I press the phone to my ear, it's already gone to voicemail, so I hang up and try again, only to get the same result.

Wherever Claire's phone is, it's off… or dead. And the woman in front of me is looking at me with such pity that something in me finally clicks slowly into place.

I stand, passing the phone back to Wes, and then raise my hands to my sides, showing they're empty. I did this with Claire when I first met her in my bedroom, all dolled up in her black lingerie.

She flinches as I get close, like she's thinking of running, so I stop moving and appraise her from the distance. "Claire…?"

Her eyes are sad—so perpetually sad—as she shakes her head. When she speaks, her voice cracks. "N-no. My name is Violet… Violet Davos."

"Davos?" My eyes flick to Wes for a moment before returning to her for the explanation on the tip of her tongue.

"I married Wes months ago, so I took his last name. I didn't have one before that… I didn't have a name for a long time."

Her voice is softer, lacking the confidence Claire found in her time with me.

"Violet?" I say, testing the name on my tongue and looking for anything else that betrays a difference between her and Claire.

"I think… Alexandre told me that Claire was my sister. He told me when he saw her that he was going to get her for me, that she would be my present. But that never happened."

I blink, considering her words.

Alexandre Davos told her that Claire was her sister.

There may be truth to that—they look identical, apart from the minute differences in their looks, the scars and the light of their fires. "It's a mindfuck, isn't it?" Wes chuckles. "That's how I felt when he gave her to me. It's why he wanted Claire so bad… my father is a collector. He already had her mother, her sister… all he needs is Claire to finish the set."

"What do you know about her mother?" I demand, turning my gaze on him. Behind me, I hear Kent getting closer, joining the fray.

"Just what my father said. She was a real hit, I guess… And a gift from your father, believe it or not." Wes chuckles. "I don't know if you wanna call that fate or karma or maybe just irony. Maybe it's just the nature of the business. Either way, she was a hit. Everybody loved her tight cunt, apparently even when she was clearly pregnant with twins. But no one lasts

forever in this business, so they kept her around just long enough to take the babies out of her, and then they disposed of her."

I feel like Wes has just smacked me on the head with a cast iron pan, my thoughts jarred and fragmented. There's too much in that statement to contend with, but only one word makes it past my lips. "Babies?"

Wes nods. "Twin girls. That's a treasure trove, you know? People will sell their soul for babies… and baby girls? Forget it." He shakes his head. "Two baby girls, the spitting image of their mother, who by all accounts was one of my father's most lucrative captives. He wanted to keep them, but the twins got split up, and years later after my father found Violet again, he stumbled upon Claire entirely by accident when your bumbling bodyguard tricked my men into believing she was Rhea. He was so excited when I told him I had your girl, but when he found out your girl was the identical twin of his favorite concubine? Well, I'm sure you can imagine. What man doesn't want to fuck twins?"

I haven't entirely figured out what he means by his father *finding* Violet, but I have a decent understanding of how fucked Davos is, so I can take a guess.

"Hitler had a thing for twins, too." Kent says at my side, his eyes sweeping over Wes like he isn't yet sure whether he's a threat or not. They turn to Violet, and he manages a small smile for her. "You okay, Miss?"

"I…" Violet looks at Wes, almost like she's asking permission to answer, and then back to Kent, only giving him a small nod.

"My father gifted Lauren to yours?"

"Lauren?" Wes arches an eyebrow. "That's her name?" He shrugs indifferently as if deciding it doesn't really matter. "Yeah, apparently, he tested her himself and knew she would bring in the big bucks. Say what you will about your father, but he was a savvy businessman."

"He was a fucking monster." I gasp, sure I'm going to be sick in a minute.

I still have so many questions, but I feel faint, and my head is ringing… no, not my head. My phone.

I slip it out of my pocket and glance down at the caller ID, seeing the missed call icon next to my sister's name. "Rhea?" I answer it despite my dry throat, not taking my eyes off Wes and his wife.

She doesn't offer me a greeting, doesn't ask whether it's me. There's a worried sob that makes my own chest tighten again, and then she speaks.

“Claire’s missing!”

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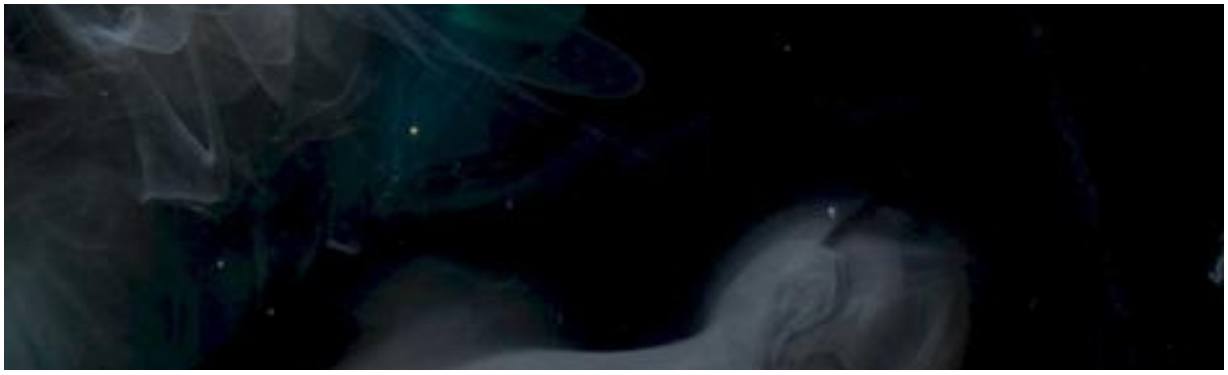

The gut punch of hearing him mention my mother hurts more than his fist in my stomach. It takes the breath out of me, and the world takes on a startling quiet as my brain tries to turn those words into anything that makes sense.

Just like your mother.

"I… what…?"

He laughs, knowing he's got me hook, line, and sinker. I'm literally trapped, but even if I wasn't, there's no way I would be able to walk away without knowing what that means.

"Oh, yes," he grins, stepping in front of me with a wicked smirk. "I knew your mother. She was a fighter—the most fight I've ever seen in anyone, probably. But she was no match for us. Just like you're no match for me. Get it through your head right now, Claire, that you won't win. It will be easier that way. Your mother didn't break, and it only hurt her in the end…"

So many questions are flooding my brain all at once that I feel like I am underwater, struggling to breathe, to hear, to see straight. But I latch onto the only thing I can, pushing the words out of my stuttering lungs. "You… knew my mother?"

"Of course I knew her. You look just like her… such strong genetics." He reaches out, running a finger along my jawline and yanking my chin up so that I have to tilt my head back to look at him. "Whoever your daddy is, I don't think he contributed anything to your gene pool, poor fucker. Hell, *I* could be your father. I sure fucked her hard enough."

His laugh at whatever fond memory he just unlocked makes my stomach drop and the bile rise. He hasn't said as much, but the dread creeping through me is a good enough indicator that whoever this man is, he wasn't my mother's gentle lover. And though I know nothing about her, I imagine her going through what I did, being sold to a stranger, paving the way for me to follow in her footsteps all these years later.

Did this man buy her? Did he take her away from a family that loved her and get her knocked up with me through force? Do I have family out there somewhere—grandparents, siblings?

The air is too thin to breathe properly, and the tears that I'm stifling don't help. I think my nose has stopped bleeding, but I can taste the copper at the back of my throat, mixing with the acid from my empty stomach. "You mean you *raped* her?"

He rolls his eyes, dropping my chin and pushing me away from him as if my presence disgusts him. "That's such an ugly word, Claire. *Don't* say it again."

There's a warning in his cold eyes, something hard and sinister that makes me think twice about saying exactly what I think of him. I'm opening my mouth to try again when he shrugs. "I took her, because she was there for the taking."

It's such a blasé answer that I can't really tell if he's serious. Apparently, he is, because he looks irritated with me when I stare at him, aghast. "It's not like I hunted her down on the street and took her. Jesus." He makes an effort to wipe away the pinched look of irritation between his brows. "Her life was already over. Why deny myself something so sweet when it was being offered to me?"

"Offered?"

"*Yes*, offered." He looks annoyed with me. "It would have been rude to turn the host down."

I realize why it looked like I was underwater when a tear rolls down my cheek and drops onto my chest, mixing with the blood that may or may not be still dripping from my nose. I didn't realize I was crying, but the tears are a betrayal I can't control.

I'd had a lot of time, both growing up and as an adult, to consider the mystery that was my parentage. Nobody ever knew how to answer my questions about who my parents were or what happened to them, so as a kid, I'd made up the best kind of fantasies, imagining that my mother was

an aspiring actress who'd been too poor to keep me, but would one day get incredibly famous and come searching for me. I dreamed that my father was an astronaut in space, and when he returned, he'd search the whole world for his little girl.

When I grew up enough to know that the world wasn't the beautiful, magical place I'd thought, I started to be more pragmatic. Maybe my mother couldn't afford me, so she gave me up and moved on with her life. Maybe my father never knew about me and never would. Maybe my mother chose a life of drugs over her baby—that was the case for a fair amount of the kids I'd known growing up in the system. Maybe the drugs even killed her.

I gave up on the idea of doing an ancestry kit to try and find my parents when I met Rhea, because for the first time, with her, I didn't feel like I was missing something.

But in all of my childlike dreaming and even my depressive teenage despair, I never considered that my existence was dark from the beginning—from conception. I suppose no one thinks about that possibility; it's too painful to entertain.

I want to know as much as I don't want to know, but what I want doesn't matter to this man. There's so much that I need to be told to make sense of this situation, but there's only one thought I can articulate.

"Who was she?"

A thin eyebrow raises in surprise, and he appraises my face. "Does it matter?"

Clearly it didn't to him. To him, she was just a warm body. But it matters to me. For better or worse, I need to know. "Yes." My throat closes just as the word slips past my lips, and I choke on a sob I stood no chance of stifling.

Of course it matters.

He lets go of a heavy sigh that's part irritation and part wistful. "Her name was Lauren. Like I said, you look just like her. From the moment I saw you pop up in that auction, I knew I had to have you… that was the best night of my life, you know? None of the girls after her ever did it for me the way she did. I tried so hard to replicate that feeling with her." His tongue flicks out over his lips, and the groan as he adjusts himself tells me he's getting hard just thinking about it. "But she was like lightning in a

bottle. It’s been twenty-one years, and no one’s ever been able to hold a candle to her. But then I saw you…”

He's slow and deliberate as he reaches a hand up to the side of my face, watching to see if I cringe away from him, if I tremble under his touch as his thumb coasts over my dry, blood-crusted lips. But I only continue to stare at him with hatred, disbelief, and a broken heart sitting like stone in my chest.

“You are so beautiful, Claire. You’re a bit older than she was when I had her, but it’s okay. I’m sure that extra time has just given you more experience, right?” He laughs. “They said in the auction that you’d spent your whole last summer fucking Remington Boudreaux, and fuck, that only made me want you more. It made a *lot* of people want you more.”

Hearing him talk about the night of the auction makes me tremble with rage or anxiety, but no matter what the cause, I’d take that dirty warehouse over this man’s basement. Even not knowing how it would turn out, that hadn’t been this horrible. That had been easier than being told that I am darkness itself, that my life exists because of a man’s vile actions. If I am darkness, there is no hope for me.

Darkness can’t touch the light. If I’m the product of this man forcing himself on my mother, then I am a black hole— a hostile, barren void. No light can exist in a black hole, and they’ll pull apart anything that dares get near them.

Maybe there’s a reason I’ve never known love… because I’d only manage to destroy those who give it to me. Because I’m not capable of giving it.

“I won the auction, though.” The man who may or may not be my father says proudly. “I made sure I won, put in a cap bid and luckily you were such a surprise, most people didn’t have time to hop in. I’d have spent every penny in my account to own you… and when my friend Alexandre messaged me to offer a discount if he got first dibs, I told him no because I didn’t want to share you with anyone. But then you fucking disappeared, so I had to get creative. Of course, I knew you’d be with Boudreaux. No cargo’s ever been intercepted before, so it was pretty easy to figure that much out.” He rolls his eyes, as though regaining my freedom was a mild disappointment for him.

“Do you know how easy it is to tap into digital files?” He asks, switching direction so suddenly that my head spins from the jolt. “Cameras, phones,

smart TVs and smart cars. We live in a world where everything is just so fucking *easy* to take, if you're smart enough to know how. Tapping into Jovich's phone to fuck with Remington? That was just for fun… just a little attempt at keeping him humble. But breaking into the circuits in his security system? That was informational. I had to make sure you were there. And I got an eyeful." He laughs. "Watching you two together only made me need you more. You make the prettiest sounds with a cock in your ass."

There aren't words for the horror that dawns on me at his admission that he's seen me in my most intimate moments… my most vulnerable. It's a different kind of awful than what he's told me so far, different than whatever he plans to do to me. It's a strange fusion of sexual assault and mental abuse, where I can't simply retreat to some place in my head, because even that has been tainted. The best times of my life with Remy were put on display for some sick fuck to jerk off to. That knowledge makes me want to peel my skin off, particularly as he licks his lips.

"I can't wait to hear it in real life, when it's my cock ripping you apart." He groans. "But you had to go and fuck everything up. You see, I was patient because I had to be… because I had to wait for just the right moment to have you. I wanted to go meet you at the airport, but it was too early, so I watched and waited. I saw all your internet searches, saw just how badly you wanted to find Wes." He turns toward the workbench against the near wall, covered in shiny tools that don't look as if they've ever been used.

It's hard to see everything set up there, since the darkness of the basement swallows most everything. What I *can* see isn't exactly comforting. Hammer, nails, screwdriver and pliers and a wrench so big it could probably fracture my skull with a single tap. None of it sends the appropriate level of fear through me though— my brain is fuzzy, like it's already trying to protect me from whatever could happen down here.

"So, I began my game, stringing you along until I could have you. It was so easy to pretend that I was a secret benefactor, someone who would help you find Wes for just the right price. I didn't need your money—I just needed you to wait to come to me until I was ready for you. And I'm ready for you, now."

As he turns back to me, the light from the upstairs flashes on something silver in his hand, and I stand, ignoring the heavy metal that pulls at my

neck as I go. I don’t move away from him. I run straight at his chest, hoping to barrel into him and catch him off guard.

My feet are lifted off the ground, instead, as I reach the end of the chain, and next thing I know, I’m being hoisted into the air on some kind of pulley, the metal tightening against the top of my throat and making me gasp for air, panic flooding in the space where oxygen belongs.

The clicking noise comes to a stop just a second before I do, the whole world jerking as the chain drops me back down a half inch and I scrabble for purchase. My toes don’t reach the ground, and when he comes around in front of me, his head is level with my stomach. “You were such a pretty shade of red when he choked you, but I always favored purple.”

His grip on my thigh turns bruising, but it’s a small pain compared to the panic flooding me as the pressure on my throat increases. I feel the heat of the blood rushing to my head, and while I try to kick, he only squeezes my leg tighter, pinning me in place.

The silver thing he’d been holding comes into focus, and I recognize the scissors just as he places them at the edge of my shirt, shredding it up the middle. “Such pretty skin. It will be beautiful, covered in my marks… red that fades to blue and purple. I will make art out of you, send it to galleries around the world so that everyone can enjoy your collapse. And when I’ve broken you so much that you’re no longer fun to play with, I’ll leave your body in pieces on Boudreaux’s doorstep and watch him try to put you back together like a puzzle.”

It's not the mention of my death that scares me, but the fact that he makes it sound like he’s going to take his time getting there.

When my shirt falls to the floor, leaving me in the green lace bra, he appraises me, his sharp eyes assessing every scar, every freckle. I don’t know what he’s looking for, but he does a circle around me in an attempt to find it, and then stops before me again.

The hand skates over my ass and grips the waistband of my shorts, slowing me down as I continue to kick out at him despite the fact that I feel heavy, my movements becoming sluggish, less intentional. The air that’s still in my lungs burns as it is slowly depleted.

“You…” My tongue is getting heavy, too, but I’m fighting to stay awake, to stay aware. The pressure on my neck almost makes me feel as though my head will snap off at any given moment, like the dolls some of the kids used to pop the heads off of. I don’t know if this man purchased me for the long

haul or if he would really go to all this trouble just to kill me, but I think if I fall asleep, it will be forever.

So, I have to keep myself talking, awake even though it would be easier to surrender to the darkness that made me. “Could be… my father?”

“Any one of about thirty men could be your father.” He laughs and yanks my shorts down my legs without ceremony, dragging them over my knees and down past my feet, which have stopped scrabbling for solid ground. It’s like swimming against a tide trying to keep moving, when all of my limbs are growing heavier.

“Probably more. She was a bit of a whore, from what I was told. But it’s possible. Just call me daddy anyway, hmm?”

He turns out my pockets, laughing when he finds the phone I used to text him. He holds it up, letting the light from above glance over it. “Smart of you, using this. I couldn’t hack you on this one… and the security cameras set up in your apartment? Closed circuit, not accessible from remote locations. That’s smart, too. Unfortunately for you, you weren’t smart enough to stay away from me. You came here so willingly I almost think you *wanted* this…”

His hand on me makes me cringe, but I don’t move as his thumb rubs idly over the skin along my inner thigh, gentle after gripping me like he was trying to snap my bone—too close to a place he shouldn’t be. “Maybe you’re a secret pain slut, just like mommy? Do you think so? If I dipped my fingers into that little cunt right now, would you be dripping wet for me?”

“Fuck… you.”

“Oh,” he chuckles, “You will. But you have to be patient, too, okay? We can do it together. It’s why I’m not going to strip you yet… because I don’t think I could control myself once I get you all out in the open. I have somewhere to be, and I don’t want to rush our first time together, but I’ll come back for you, okay, baby?”

His breath hovers against my flesh a moment, and then he smells me… grabbing my waist and pulling me into him so that he can bury his face between my thighs and inhale deeply. I don’t think the noise he makes is intentional, and neither are the ones coming from me… ragged gasps slowing down as my body begins to shut down. I feel his lips on the inside of my leg, so close to the edge of my lace underwear, but my eyes are heavy, refusing to stay open as he nuzzles his face between my legs.

I’m distantly aware of the kiss he presses there, a humiliation I can’t even contend with because of how quickly I’m fading. If I hang to death in this basement, I don’t doubt that when he gets back, he’ll follow through with fucking my corpse all the same.

Each time my eyes flutter closed, an electrical shock from somewhere inside my brain demands I open them again, so I do. I do it three times, and then on the fourth, the shock doesn’t come from inside of me this time.

It comes as I land in a heap on the floor, the pressure loosening from around my neck as the blood rushes back to my extremities. His back is already toward me as he retreats up the stairs, chuckling to himself.

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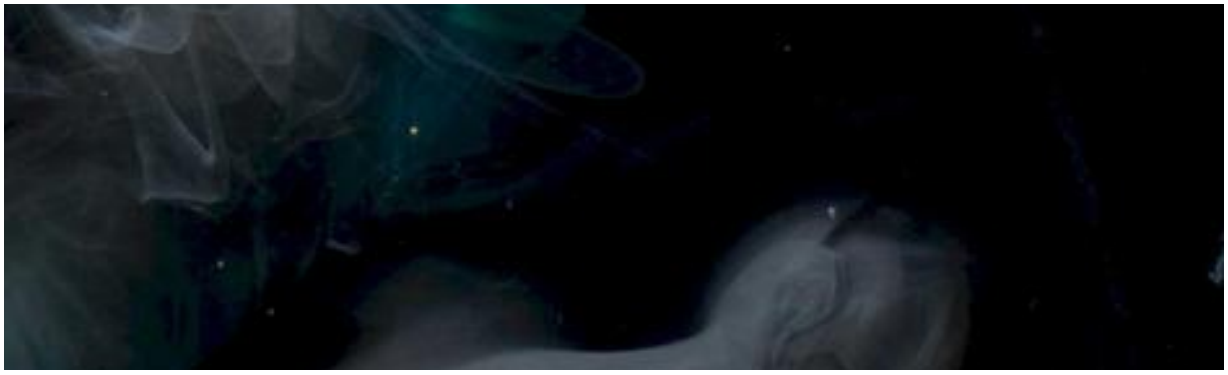

I knew I should have put a tracker in her. The thought crossed my mind when she lay in my bed after Wes sold her to some sadistic fuck, and I told myself I was crazy. I reminded myself that I don't treat people like cattle, like property, but that was before I realized she fucking owned my soul. I didn't even realize it after everything we did together, after watching her rip my fucking heart out and get on that plane, after suffering through these months without her.

But I realize it now. Because if she dies, I'll die with her. If she dies…

"Stop fidgeting." Wes snaps, slamming the laptop shut. "You're fucking driving me crazy here."

I stop to stare at him, delirious with the dread in my chest, my stomach, my lungs… it's like turpentine, filling me more and more with every second that passes, taking away my ability to breathe, to think.

"If I'm bothering you, I could have Simon depressurize the cabin long enough to let you off. How good a swimmer are you? If you survive the fall from forty thousand feet, would you be able to tread water 'til someone happens upon you?"

Wes only laughs, unbothered with the threat. "You wouldn't risk all of us just to punish me. You're not the bad guy, Remy, so stop pretending you are. You're shit at it."

"You're shit at playing the good guy, so why don't we both stick to what we know?"

That only gets a smirk from him. “I know more about the inner workings of my father’s system than you do. Just because you’ve had access to his accounts doesn’t mean you know how to run an operation so sophisticated… or how to ruin it.”

I would have probably killed him on sight if I hadn’t been so distracted by his fucking wife. And even then, I may have killed him if my sister hadn’t called to tell me that Claire was missing.

Wes says he knows how to help, but he also claims to have no idea where she is. I’ve already threatened to flay his skin from his bones if I find out he lied to me, but something about the way he looks at his wife—Claire’s *sister*—makes me think he may be telling the truth.

“Why should I believe you?” I snap. “What basis do we have for trust, *brother*?”

“Well, it sure isn’t blood.” Wes smirks, leaning back in his chair and tipping his head a bit, like he’s trying to figure out something he hasn’t asked about. “But there’s a few good reasons I can think of.” His eyes trail to his wife, who’s sleeping curled up in her seat. It’s a strange sight… she looks so much like Claire, to the point I feel déjà vu sweeping at the corners of my mind as I think of the first time I had Claire on my jet, how she’d been so nervous, how she’d called me a bronzed god and fuck if it hadn’t felt good to know she idolized me already.

She’s wrong. I’m no God, now or ever. I’m a mere man, and it is her who should be worshipped. And I *will* worship her when she’s back in my arms, because once we find her, she’ll never leave my arms again. If she wants the world, I’ll buy it all like Monopoly spots. If she wants the moon, I’ll have to buy stock in Space X. If she wants kids, I’ll keep her so full of my cum that she’ll be constantly pregnant, popping them out back to back until she begs me for no more.

It’s desperate, and yet I know it to be true even as the thought crosses my mind. Watching her walk away from me was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to live through, but knowing what could happen to her is the new hardest thing.

Even when I walked through the houses of horrors and think back to everything that happened that night Davos first introduced me to the world I was bred for, I could dissociate. I could close off some part of my heart, my brain, and just fucking *deal* with whatever we came upon. But I can’t do that with her.

I’ve seen the most depraved things man can do, and I’ve seen people who have lived through it, but if that happens to Claire because I was too scared to give her what she wanted…

No.

“She saved my life.” Wes says, interrupting my spiral as I’m raking my hands through my hair.

When I look at him, he’s opened the computer again and is already clicking away, trying to find the information he promised me. He doesn’t look up as he continues. “I went out with her the night we met so that I could build trust, and I was going to use her to get to your sister. She was funny, sweet, and oh so innocent. I was intrigued,” he casts a quick glance at his wife, ensuring she’s still asleep. “I was interested in something real with her. When I walked in to her on the table, I could have fixed everything and helped her. We wanted Rhea… she was *promised* to my father by yours. Claire begged me to help her.”

I take a step closer, my fingers closing into a fist that I plan to put right through his face. He stops me with a hand up, not done talking. “Just listen, okay? I’m not showboating here. I’m telling you, she had so much hope in her eyes, so much relief when she saw a familiar face. And I could have saved her, but I didn’t. I put two and two together, realized she’d been hooking up with you, and I decided to use her instead because I fucking hate you.”

I don’t have to tell him the feeling is mutual. He knows.

“But even after all that,” he licks his lips, and I can see him trying to work through the thoughts in his head. “When I was bleeding out on your boat, she helped me. Knowing it would piss you off, knowing she may crash the boat because she clearly didn’t know what she was doing, knowing that I wasn’t sorry about what I did to her. I would have bled to death on your white leather seats if she had just ignored me or run away… and I couldn’t have blamed her. And then she saved me again, at that fucking veterinarian’s office you took me to. She gave me her blood, didn’t she?”

I narrow my eyes on him, wondering how he knows that.

“I was in and out, but I saw her sitting there with the tube in her arm. She gave me her blood even though all I ever did was take from her. It saved my life, and when I woke up on that table later, I knew it was because of her.

So, rest assured, brother, that this has nothing to do with you. I am doing this for *her*."

His words take the fight out of me, and I sink down into my chair, hating that I'm trapped in this tin can in the air. I'm useless up here, unable to do a damn thing to help the woman I love.

And I fucking love her. That's the only explanation for whatever this is… this feeling that makes me want to die, to live, to fight and kill and do anything for her. It transcends lust, because it's not her body that I'm dying to sink into… it's her. Everything that makes her who she is— her laugh, her spitfire attitude, her soft spirit.

"We'll find her." Kent assures me.

I know he's been through this… he's been going through this for years now. And I don't know how he's still alive, how he can keep going, how he wakes up every day and just keeps trying.

If we find Claire and it's just her body, I'll never recover.

And that's the real danger here. Wherever she is, it's not somewhere good. She is in danger because her buyer is still out there, because any number of people could have snatched her off the street, because she wouldn't be ignoring my sister if everything was okay.

The spirit is an easy thing to kill—I've seen it done many times, even had mine taken from me. I already know her body and soul are capable of enduring more than anyone should have to, but they could both shatter at any time.

I've seen women who live like zombies, walking around in bodies that are still very much alive, but with dead eyes, no soul behind them. I've seen women who have had that ripped from them, who have bled it out of their broken bodies little by little, women who don't seem to realize what they lost because they're so numb.

I have experience fixing bodies… broken bones, bruises, cuts that never healed right. Those things are easy, but I don't know how to fix a shattered spirit. I'll try, for her, but I hope I don't have to.

"Dimitri is over Nevada now. He'll be on the ground soon. Your sister and her bodyguard are en route to your house, though he said he had to drug her to get her on the plane…" Kent clears his throat, not having any clue about how neurotic my sister can be. If Eli really did have to drug her to get her to a secure location, he deserves a raise. I know how much she cares, and I know she wouldn't have wanted to go anywhere. But the truth is,

Claire could be *anywhere* in the world. Getting Rhea somewhere secure is pivotal to ensuring I can focus everything I have on getting her best friend back in one piece.

When I simply nod at him, Kent must decide that's not as weird as he imagined it to be, because he shakes his head.

"Ah, got it!" Wes says, jumping up from his seat and reaching for the phone in his pocket. He doesn't say anything to me as I follow him, taking a few steps away so that he can place the call.

"Speakerphone!" I demand, as he's pressing the thing against his ear. He turns to grace me with a middle finger and a roll of his eyes, but he drops it into his palm and turns the speaker on anyway, just in time for the ring to pick up.

"Hello?"

The voice on the other end isn't familiar. I expected his father, or maybe Holland, or some mystery figure with a thick accent. But it's just a man, without any discernible accent, and a deep voice that sounds something between confused and annoyed.

"Evers." Wes says curtly. "Long time, huh? It's Wes."

There's a sound of movement from the line, and Wes rushes out, "Don't hang up. I need a favor."

A moment of heavy silence passes before Evers laughs. It's not a sound of amusement; he seems more shocked than anything. "A fucking *favor*? Is this a joke?"

"No joke. I need to find someone. It's pivotal."

I vaguely consider telling Wes I'm impressed by his vocabulary, but I'm too intent pinning my hopes on this mystery man. Wes hasn't told me anything about who he is or how he can help us, but I'm desperate enough to make a deal with the devil himself right now.

"Can't help. I'm busy."

"You're not busy." Wes shakes his head. "I saw the headlines. You bought a fucking newspaper? What are you going to do, start outing us in the Sunday Morning Herald?" Wes snorts, as if he's amused with himself.

"It's got nothing to do with you. I told you when I walked away, it's fucking over. Don't call again."

"Bad breakup?" I guess, because it's easier to focus on whatever the fuck is going on right now than the fact that my whole world feels like it could collapse at any moment.

“Who’s that?” Evers asks, his voice flat despite the obvious interest of his words.

“A friend.” Wes explains away. I don’t know if I hate him calling me brother or friend more. They’re both equally horrendous. “A friend who needs your help.”

“I can’t help. I sold the kingdom and gave away my key. Call your father, I’m sure daddy can help you.”

“Nope. He’s useless. We need you.”

There’s a heavy sigh, and then an equally heavy hit as I imagine he slams his fist against something. A moment later, a car horn blares, a long, continuous sound that has both Wes and I cringing.

It stops as suddenly as it began, and I hear Evers clear his throat. “You know I designed it with lock and key security. I don’t have the software anymore.”

“You didn’t rebuild it?” Wes asks, doubtful.

“Nope. Don’t need that juju, thanks.”

“I don’t believe you. You were too smart to not have any kind of backup system.”

Evers chuckles, and I can’t tell if they’re flirting or not. Wes just has a way of talking that makes it sound like he’s constantly on the verge of jumping someone’s bones, and I find it supremely fucking annoying. “Fine. I did try to recreate it, but I haven’t cracked the algorithm. It’s useless, and without the original system, so am I. Sorry, I can’t help.”

He sounds like he’s moving to hang up when Wes speaks again. “I know where the original is.”

Evers contemplates the words in silence, and Wes lets him. I still don’t know what the fuck we’re actually talking about, but they’re offering me hope, and I’m not too proud to take it.

“I’ll give you anything.” I tell him honestly. “Any figure. Name your price and it’s yours.”

“You clearly have no clue who I am.” Evers sneers. “I don’t want your fucking money.”

“Then what do you want?” I ask. “Anything.”

“You’ll have my debt.” Wes says, before Evers can offer an answer. “I’ll owe you a favor. No expiration, no limit. Just do this for me now.”

“I’ll do it,” he says, slowly, “but after this you leave me the fuck alone, the way you’re supposed to. Got it?”

“Of course.” Wes agrees. “Get your stuff in order. I’ll have a jet waiting.”

They don’t say anything else to one another before Wes ends the call and stuffs it back in his pocket. “Well?” I demand, not sure what even just happened. “How is he going to help me find her?”

Wes ignores me, crossing back to his chair and sinking against it. “Declan Evers. An old friend.”

“The way we’re friends?” I sneer, dropping into my own seat and putting my head in my hands to try and counteract the pressure that’s built under my skull.

“No,” he laughs. “Evers was a real friend. My roommate in college.”

I don’t really care about his old roommate or his time in college, which probably amounted to drowning kittens or something. But I need the distraction, because every time the silence falls, I hear her screams echoing in that dirty old warehouse and imagine someone trying to recreate them.

“Was?” I ask, searching for a distraction to keep me from tearing my own hair out.

“He’s a little mad at me.” Wes shrugs. “I figured it would blow over by now, but at least he seems to be softening a bit.”

I don’t bother telling him his friend hadn’t seemed too soft to me. “What did you do to him?”

“Convinced him to sell his software to my father. He was desperate for the money, didn’t want to part with it, but he thought the cash would solve all his problems. It didn’t, and now he’s taking it out on me.”

“Riveting.” I snap, annoyed that he hasn’t given me anything more to latch onto. “And how does this help me?”

“I already told you,” Wes shakes his head. “This isn’t for you, and it isn’t for our stupid slut of a sister. It’s for Claire.”

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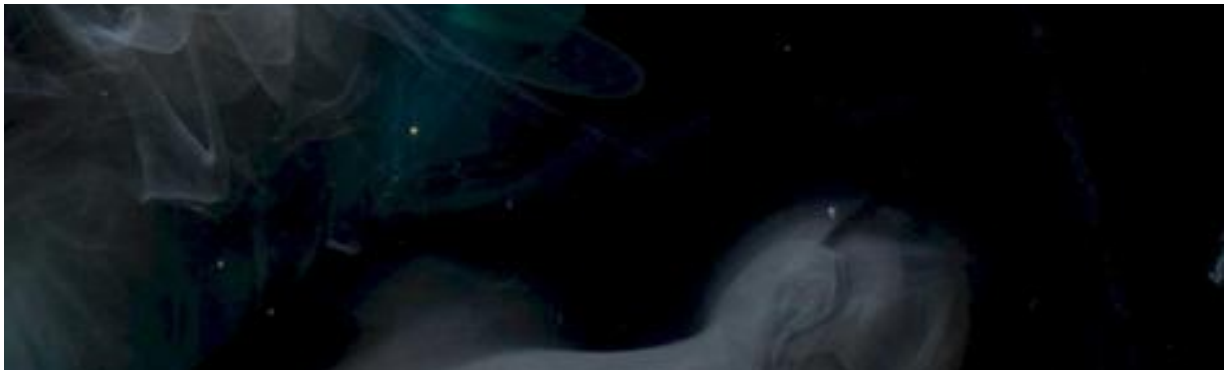

If my time with Remy taught me one thing, it’s that I am not a victim.

I feel like my body is too heavy, my lungs too full of the wrong stuff. The basement is cold, and it takes everything in me to stand, but I’m not going to lay here in a heap on the floor just waiting for him to come back for me.

He took my phone with him, so there’s no way to call anyone, but I’ve got an ace up my sleeve… or rather, in my bra.

I may be stupid enough to attempt to trust a stranger with helping me find Wes, but I am not stupid enough to believe that it was safe doing so. I was willing to take a calculated risk, I just miscalculated how awful that risk would be. My body can handle whatever abuse he plans to throw at me.

Even if my entire existence feels like it’s been shattered, I’m not willing to be his toy. When he gave me the phone, Dimitri had no idea that I’d be using it to get myself into this situation… but he was smart enough to give me the wireless tag and link his phone with it so that if I ever needed it, he could see where I was. I turned his access on right before I left the mall, and the push notification that he would have gotten should have alerted him that something was up. Considering that I haven’t answered the burner phone, he’ll likely already know that it’s not a fluke… that I need his help.

For a man who had made it sound as if technology bent to his will or something, he wasn’t smart enough to think of something as simple as a location tag. It’s kind of comical, actually, but I can’t get enough air into my lungs to laugh about it. I don’t know how close I was to dying strung up

from the rafters, but it takes a long time to feel like I can breathe again… probably, in part, because of my broken nose.

When I've finally steadied myself enough to test the limits of the leash I'm on, I take slow steps, trying not to focus on how dark it is. I wish I could put my hands out in front of me to feel for something, but they're somehow connected to the rest of what I can't see overhead, so I can only take tentative steps, hoping he hasn't got a bear trap or something down here. It's crazy, but my brain is cycling through a million possibilities, trying to assess every detail of where I am, of what information I know. He gave me so much that I need to explore—I still don't know who this man is. A random serial killer in fancy suits? A doctor who became obsessed with the girl who would be my mother?

My father?

But I can't focus on any of that right now. I don't know how long I have until he comes back, which means every second counts, so I push forward, one small step at a time until I feel the tug on my shoulders as I meet with resistance. The strain makes me cry out, but I stifle the sound by sinking my teeth into my lip and pushing harder, testing the limits of how far I can go.

Slick tied me up with rope before they left me on the filthy floor, and I spent the entire time working to free myself from it. And I managed to do it, breaking free to strangle Wes with it. Chain may be stronger than rope, but I freed myself once, and I can do it again. So, I strain forward, moving centimeters at a time and ignoring the tears that spring fresh in my eyes when the strain starts to feel like I'm being torn apart.

I don't know how long I exhaust myself, straining forward only to be tugged back a fractional amount when the pain tears at my limbs and I feel like I'm ripping myself apart. The reminder that I'm a black hole is aptly timed when I feel like I'm being shredded into pieces. At last, I can't hold on any longer, letting the resistance pull me back a few hard-won inches. When the tension eases, I tug at my wrists again, squinting through the darkness. If I could just see what the system looks like overhead, I could try to figure out how I'm wrapped up in it, and then I could figure out how to get out of it.

I know it isn't anything as simple as the chain being thrown over a random beam, given that he'd somehow managed to automate the movement. That means it's likely some sort of pulley system, whether manual or electric. Given that I'm attached at two points, it can't be a single

length of chain, so I decide to test that theory, walking backwards to the spot where he strung me up and then taking a few steps right, toward where I think he stood when I tried to rush him. The tools he'd had might be able to help me break free, so I move toward where I think they should be, though the darkness is disorienting and I can't be sure it's the right way, given that the chain at my neck begins to tighten.

Nothing catches against my feet as I push forward, suddenly aware that I lost a single shoe somewhere in my struggle. The cold floor is smooth, almost glossy feeling—and sadly, too slippery to gain any traction against. Frustration surges through me and comes out choked around the garrot I've fashioned myself.

I give up, the fight leaving me breathless as I let myself fall to the floor, too exhausted to try again. Instead, I press my face against the glassy tile, letting the feeling ground me. The anxiety rolling through my chest definitely won't help me to breathe any easier, and despite the cold air, the chill feels good on my skin. My heart seizes in my chest, threatening to give it all up, and I suppress a defeated sob, anger mixing with the anxiety in me.

I never had a mother, an aunt, a sister, or a grandmother. My whole life has been shaped by men… their toy, their inconvenience, their pet to provide attention to when they want and then shut me away when they're bored. Most of my foster parents hadn't been bad, but even when I was in a home where I thought I may get to stay, it was always the men calling the shots, always the boys who were there longest and claimed seniority over the family pets, the spots at the table, the toys.

If I'm honest with myself, Eric Giante wasn't the first to try to ruin me. He was just the first that succeeded. Before that, there were the kids who tried to trick me into strip Uno, who coerced me into giving up my sloppy first kiss under a scratchy blanket, or who threw me in the closet and refused to let me out while they told me stories about spiders crawling inside of me and demons coming to feed on me in the dark. On the occasions that they were caught, it would inevitably be explained away as "boys will be boys", and I'd be expected to dry my tears and move on.

Whatever happens, whatever he does to me, this man will never own me. No matter what he takes, I will give him nothing.

When the final tear splashes against the floor, I lift my head up and decide to renew my fight. I'd rather be found dead dangling in his basement

than give him the satisfaction of hearing me scream or watching me bleed, but I'm not giving up just yet.

The spot on the ground catches my attention as I stand, so I run the flat of my foot over it, feeling for any sort of interruption in the texture. There's none, and when I move my toes over it slowly, it shrinks in size.

It's a reflection, nothing more, but that means that there is light. And light means hope, so I spin, twisting the chains over my head to try and see behind me. But there's only darkness there, uninterrupted and vast. I can't see where it ends, can't tell how big the basement is. I can't remember from looking at the house whether there appeared to be windows at ground level, but if there are any, they're covered completely.

I look up instead, squinting through the darkness for anything. When I find it, another quick burst of hope explodes inside my chest, but I can't make out what it is. Not an escape route, not sunlight, but maybe the flashing of a security camera, recording this whole wicked show. My stomach clenches at the thought of not just what he could do to me, but what he could do with the film, of who could see it. If I die down here, will he release it? Will the people in my life see me in my final moments?

A current is threatening to rip me into the downwards spiral, so I fight it off, feeling through the darkness for my shoe. Once I get it, I kick it behind me, so when my clumsy fingers close around it, I can tear out the laces. It's a shot in the dark, quite literally, and if I miss, I run the risk of losing my only weapon… not that I think I can do much with a single, dirty shoelace, but I suppose there's a reason they take them from you in prison.

My first attempt to throw the shoe results in it smacking me in my own head, so I move forward, letting the chain tighten around my neck to get more leverage for my arms. The second attempt ends with my shoe falling to the ground without making any kind of noise alerting me of a connection, so I try again.

I'm on the twelfth try, with my second shoe since the first one ended up somewhere out of my range of motion, when I hear the first clunk of whatever I hit, and the second clunk of it landing right next to me. Inspired by my accuracy last time, I try again, getting a grip on the toe with one hand and bending over as far as I can to maximize the distance.

I don't hear the sound of it hitting this time, because it's immediately eclipsed by the loud, mechanical chirping that seems to come from whatever I just hit. An alarm of some sort. It beeps like some kind of

countdown, and then all of a sudden, a shrill screaming sound comes from it, making it clear that the previous noise was just a prelude to this.

A smoke detector.

The thought flashes through my mind half a second before the sprinklers turn on. And then the whole room lights up with a strobing red light that cuts through the drops of water raining down on me.

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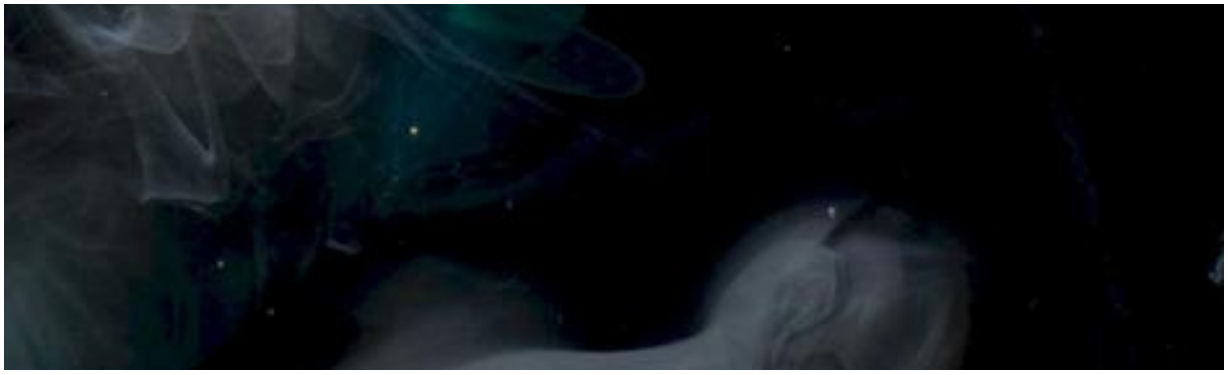

I’m going to be sick. No one is saying the quiet part out loud, and even though we may be able to find her, it may not matter. I’ve raked my hands against my scalp so many times I actually ripped out a small chunk of hair, and I can’t make my foot stop tapping.

Wes pulls his hand away from his head and sits up, looking fit to kill me. “Fucking stop it.” He growls. “You won’t be any use to her if you’re too busy having a psychotic break.”

He’s right, and that pisses me off. I don’t dare admit as much to him, but I don’t have to, because he knows. “I thought you knew better than to go and catch feelings, Boudreaux. They turn you into a pathetic bitch, even more than you already were.”

“Coming from you,” I sneer.

He cocks an eyebrow, watching me imperiously. “Which means what?”

“Your *wife*?” I almost choke on my laughter. “You couldn’t have the original, so you had to go and get yourself a replica? You sure you didn’t clone her with daddy’s money?”

“Cute, Rem, but no. What I told you back there was the sad, sick truth. Call it fate, call it shit luck, call it divine karma, I don’t care. The truth is their mother was one of our father’s whores, and eventually, she wasn’t useful to them anymore. She was killed so they could sell her babies. Some rich fuck bought Violet, and she had a good life right up until they repossessed her.”

There’s a lot of things I want to demand he elaborate on, but the only word that comes from my mouth is, “Repossessed?”

“Mm,” he nods, leaning forward to roll his shoulders. “You’ve heard of repo men.”

It’s not a question.

I have, of course. In a business like ours, there are several classes of men.

Collectors, fixers, figureheads, enforcers, masters, and repo men. When someone owes a debt, it’s the repo men that come to collect. “You can—repossess a person?”

“Of course you can.” He sneers. “Haven’t you ever read the fine print on any of the girls you bought?” When I say nothing, he laughs. “Why would you? You never planned to keep them.” He rolls his eyes to show me exactly what he thinks of me. “You have to pay in full, of course, when you make a purchase. It’s the same for the children as it is if you’re just getting a slave. The difference is, the risk is higher with children, so the system is different. You have to keep paying your dues, year after year, or you get foreclosed upon and we take back what we lent to you.”

“I’ve never paid—”

“You’re the son of a Grand Vizier. Of course you’ve never paid dues.” He shakes his head and leans forward, pouring one of the glasses between us full of whiskey. When he hands it out to me, I shake my head, so he drains it instead and then puts it down in favor of the bottle.

“I don’t understand.” I tell him truthfully. “What do you mean, Grand Vizier?”

“Christ, Remington, your ignorance is astounding. What have you actually done with your life? Has your head just been up your sister’s ass so far you never realized what was going on around you?”

I don’t like the way he talks about my sister, but I want the information he’s giving me, so I ignore that. “I never *wanted* a place in this world.”

“You never had a choice.” He laughs. “Neither did I.” I don’t know if he means for me to sympathize with him, but I don’t. “My father’s empire… he didn’t build it alone, no matter how much he tries to claim he did. The Brotherhood was born hundreds of years ago, when trading slaves was far more acceptable. It was a gathering of the elite, where they could go to trade off the whore they’d impregnated before their wives found out… a place to meet others of similar… *tastes*.”

A brotherhood.

It’s not the first time I’ve heard of the word in this context.

Like it’s been called upon, I remember a dinner party my parents threw once, waiting at the top of the stairs for it to be over so Rhea and I could go down to eat. I’d heard a stranger call my father his brother, and he’d gotten angry, telling him he wasn’t an equal. I hadn’t realized then what that was about, but now the pieces make sense.

“What is the brotherhood?” I ask, studying his face.

He slams his head back against the headrest, clearly happy to reacquaint himself with luxury after however long he’s been hiding in squalor. He casts a glance at the other passengers. Violet is still passed out—I’d be worried she’s dead if she hadn’t moved around a few times in the last couple hours—and Kent is sleeping with his mouth open, snoring softly.

But the two of us are still awake, so I guess it’s true, what they say about there being no rest for the wicked.

“I just fucking told you. The brotherhood is our world. It’s our life—the system we were fucking bred to uphold.”

“What’s it called?”

“You want to Google it?” He laughs. “You won’t find anything. You wear the symbol on your skin, and you don’t even know the name of the fucking society?” He shakes his head, pushing up his sleeve to reveal on his forearm the same tattoo I have… the one I had inked on me before I moved to Costa Rica as their pawn. He traces the bird with his finger, focused on the details. “The Brotherhood of The Dove.”

It sounds too ridiculous to be true, but Wes isn’t grinning the way I imagine he would if he was simply fucking with me. “The Brotherhood of the Dove?” I huff a laugh that’s not amused. “I thought that was a fucking pigeon.”

“Same thing.” Wes smirks. “You want a history lesson?”

I don’t really, but I need to know more, so I gesture for him to carry on. “Ever heard of King Juan? Old fuck, not important, but what he did was important. He was a rich and powerful man, who did what rich and powerful men do. He organized feasts and parties to celebrate himself and flaunt his wealth. He created the Order of the Dove, and he had these lavish events with lots of food and wine and pussy, of course. He didn’t last long, since the news of his feasts traveled far, and people found out he was serving ‘*pigeon*’ at these events.” He laughs and chases it with a swig from the whiskey bottle.

I mean, eating pigeon doesn't appeal to me, but when your choices were basically various types of birds and herbs, what difference does it make? Turkey, chicken, pheasant, quail, pigeon? It's all the same.

"Rumor has it, it wasn't really pigeon he was feeding his guests." Wes smirks. "Whether that's true or not, men of a certain caliber should have never been seen indulging in such lowly vices. When the Brotherhood was born, they named themselves the Brotherhood of the Dove as an homage to the men who have *eclectic tastes*."

"As in…?"

"As in the exact types of people we cater to." He shrugs, as if that really should have been obvious. And maybe it should have. "Some men like to hunt for their food. Some like to tenderize it first. Others like to play with it."

Now I really am going to throw up. What he's saying is revolting, and it makes my stomach sour with the bile inside. "Fucking cannibalism?"

"I mean, they make up a very small base of our clients, but I know they're out there somewhere." He doesn't look nearly as bothered by the thought of cannibalism as he should, but I suppose it's on me for being surprised.

"All of our clients have tastes that are frowned upon by what the outside world considers *right* or *just*. In the Brotherhood, all is welcome, as long as you're willing to pay for it. You want a kid to raise? Sure, we've got them. You want a kid to use for other things? No problem. You want a slave who can clean your house *and* lick the blood off your dick after you fuck her? We've got them."

The revulsion must be evident on my face because he chuckles a little. "The Brotherhood was around for hundreds of years, back before women thought they were worth anything. Some things evolved with time, and others didn't. But our fathers? They revolutionized it… the *internet* revolutionized it. My father clawed his way to the top as Grand Sovereign, and he brought yours along for the ride. You and me? The little foot soldiers?" He laughs, though I can tell even he isn't finding humor in his words. "We're as good as rats to them. Meanwhile, the Brotherhood—the wealthy, the elite, the people who pay for our services? They keep the whole thing afloat by feeding their monsters in secret."

I've never cared much to think about how they built this system, but I suppose I should have. Knowing how something is built will only make it

easier to dismantle it. Though, to be fair, dismantling is not strong enough a word for what I want to do to the prison they've crafted in plain sight.

"Our services will always be required because there will always be people willing to pay for them. We aren't the monsters. They are."

I shake my head, incredulous, as Wes shrugs. "We just provide the prey."

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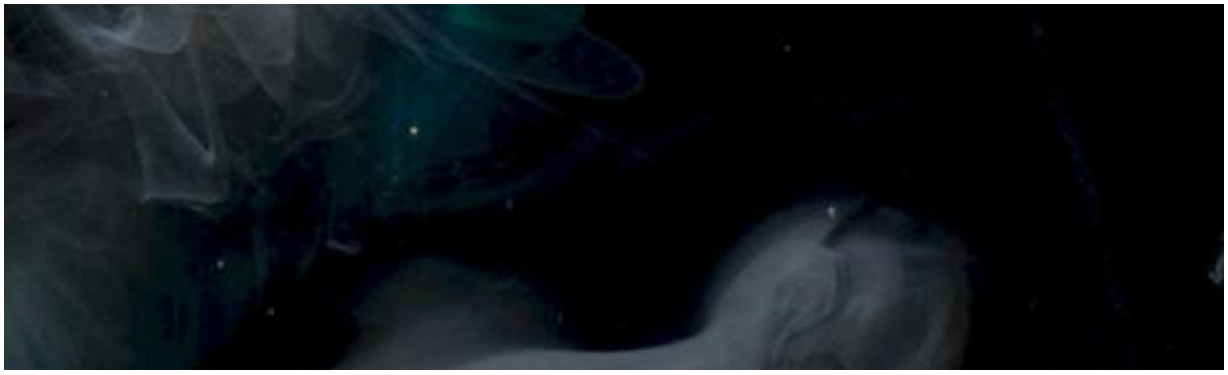

The shrill ringing is so loud, I can’t even hear myself screaming. I’m not even sure if I am, anymore, because I’ve pressed my arms so tightly over my ears that I begin to think the ringing is in my head.

I don’t know if I should be relieved that I triggered the alarm or not. A fire alarm should mean first responders, which means freedom, but what if he beats them down here?

The spray that washes over my skin is cold, and rather than offering me comfort as the water usually does, it’s just one more thing contributing to the sensory overload about to combust within me. So, I close my eyes, shutting out the strobing red light, the dank walls that come into view as the alarm haze flashes over them, the horrid screeching in my ears. I focus only on the sprinklers as they splash over me, the water droplets beading on my skin.

I’m barely lucid, retreated so far into a dark, safe place in my head that I almost forget where I am. Maybe I even do forget a little bit, before the sudden jerking sensation, the falling feeling, jolts me awake.

The crash is loud enough to cut into the screeching alarm, and it knocks me off my feet as I’m pulled backwards with it, the chain around my neck tightening. For one horrifying minute, I think I’m being dragged upwards, that I’m about to strangle.

And then he’s there, standing right above me. I can’t hear anything beyond the wail of the alarm, but I can tell by the way his mouth moves and the rage in his eyes that he’s screaming, furious. He drops his weight on me

— a hand across the face sends rippling pain over my cheek, and then I see the wrench in his other hand just as he brings it through the air. Instinct guides my hands to cover my face.

Though I don't get enough slack to keep the blow from glancing off my head, it hits almost perfectly between my wrists.

Maybe the impact of the fall let the link at my wrists loosen, and his attempt to shut me up with the heavy iron actually breaks the chain. Maybe I have a sadistic guardian angel who isn't yet ready to let me out of this cruel misery. However it happens, I feel the release as my wrists are freed, so I scramble to grab the chain before it falls away as my captor seems to get his bearings back. He's even less used to the darkness than me, which is my only advantage.

I don't know what his play is right now—maybe the alarm isn't backed up to a fire station. Maybe it isn't as loud as it feels. I don't know if he means to kill me or just shut me up for a minute, but he's already told me he's playing for keeps. So, I do the same, gripping the chain that was wrapped around my wrists, pulling it taut between my hands.

He's too busy trying to scramble for the wrench he lost control of to notice, and when he gets it in his hands, he turns back to me, and I see the objective. He doesn't want to kill me—he wants me to suffer, slowly, painfully. He wants to break me apart bit by bit; he's already begun. My ploy for freedom has angered him, but he is controlled enough that he isn't willing to sacrifice weeks or months of fun with me for the sake of it.

But I am. I'm willing to die to spite him. He drops the wrench like he's had a better thought and fumbles in his pocket for something, slipping it into his palm as his hand comes down to cover my tender nose and mouth.

A sudden tugging at my neck tells me exactly what he took from his pocket—a remote. It drags me steadily and slowly backwards across the cold and wet ground, and he moves over me, the strobing red light making his cruel eyes seem so much more malicious.

But I'm a killer, too. And there's no time like the present to remember it. In one fluid motion, I get the chain around the back of his neck and wrap it tightly around it, pulling so hard that his fear is immediate, visceral. His hand leaves my face to claw at the chain, but it does little to allow me to breathe… just as it does little to allow him to pry his away.

"Let's see who can hold out longer." I hiss, even knowing that he can't hear me.

He wanted to fuck with me, not kill me. I want to kill him, and I've got the chain in just the right spot to do it. I don't let it drop even as his eyes bug out of his head, desperate with fear and the pressure I'm forcing into two directions.

I catch glimpses of his struggle in the strobing red light—his tongue poking out from behind his lips, trying to scream for mercy he wouldn't give me, his eyes wide with terror that he stoked in me.

I've linked my fingers through the ends of the chain, and I pull them so hard in opposite directions that I think my fingers may fall off. I welcome it before his body goes limp, easing against me even as he still fights slowly, his motions becoming jauntier, less coordinated. He weighs me down, his body pinning mine to the cement, and I choke the life out of him with intention.

I watch as the life leaves his eyes, as they flutter with his fight to stay awake. I watch him succumb, his neck dropping at the same time as his hands, until only I'm keeping him up by the chain in hand. I feel the warmth spread out around me when he pisses himself over top of me, like he just wants to land one last hit. And I think I feel the minute his soul is gone, ferried away to whatever Hell exists for monsters like him.

I'm shaking when I drop the chain, but I won't let it go just in case he's still alive. I waste no time bucking him off me, though. He falls to the ground without ceremony.

I turn behind me to get a look at whatever he had me attached to—a massive spool of chain, clicking and groaning as it pulls me toward it.

It's going to strangle me.

Panic tries to ignite in my veins, but it's blunted by the common sense that I need to get out of this. My feet gain no traction on the ground, slipping in the water and piss, a useless attempt to slow myself down. I reach behind my neck, forcing my fingers beneath the chain, trying to pry it away with all my might. But when my fingers graze over the cool metal, I know it's useless. He fucking padlocked me to this thing, and now the motor is reeling me in like brush into a woodchipper.

The flame behind me flickers and grows despite the water raining down upon it, sparking over wires that are sticking out of what I presume to be his control panel. It's my last hope, and it's so wild and desperate that I lunge at it, blindly feeling for a button, a lever, anything.

The touch sends a shock straight through me, racing up my fingertips, tracing a path through my stomach, and zipping out my toes. For a moment, I can't move, can't breathe, every part of me on lock as I'm dragged, nearly lifeless across the wet floor.

And then the grinding sound of the chain coiling turns to a whine, the movement slows, and the tugging stops, leaving me breathless, flat on my back as I try to catch my breath.

The world's gone quiet, peaceful in a way, as I stare up at the ceiling, the darkness no longer suffocating. In fact, it's actually kind of comforting, a welcoming difference from the angry red lights flashing in the edges of my peripherals.

There's no more fear or cold as I lie there and focus on breathing freely for the first time in too long.

I *am* darkness, and for once, I'm at peace with it.

I don't realize my eyes have closed until they're fluttering open, surprised at the sudden warmth on my skin, the touch. The light overhead makes me blink hard against it, turning and expecting to see my captor, my father, my mother's rapist.

I don't even recognize the man looking down at me, just as I don't hear the words that are falling from his lips, which are moving rapidly, opening and closing around words that I'm not sure are meant for me.

When he scoops me up, I expect to feel the weight of the chain drag me back, but it doesn't. I'm weightless in his arms, and it occurs to me that I'm somewhere between consciousness and not. I feel myself bounce against his chest with every step, a little of the chain still holding fast to my mind falling away with each stair we ascend.

By the time we reach the top of the staircase, awareness has me putting my fragmented thoughts together enough to realize I know the man who picked me up… the man who hasn't yet set me down.

"No." It comes out as a whisper, but seconds later, it's a cry. I dig my nails into the skin at his neck, his arms, trying to push out of his grip. "No!"

"It's okay!" He says, ignoring my pleas. "I've got you. You're alright."

"NO!" I push out of his arms, taking him by surprise so that he doesn't have a chance to try and restrain me.

I can see the confusion on the senator's face as I land on my side and scramble quickly to my feet, all without removing my eyes from him. I've

got control of my hands again, my arms no longer tethered behind me, but my limbs feel too heavy to be of any use.

“Get away from me!” I warn him, trying to put distance between us as I take a step back—and he immediately takes one forward.

The alarm has stopped screaming, and all around the upstairs where we stand in a grand foyer, water is pooled across the wood floor. The man who took me isn’t anywhere that I can see.

“Stay right there!” I warn him, before the senator can take another step toward me. He’s got his hands out, like he’s making to catch a fly between his bare palms.

“I’m here to help. Dimitri called, he sent me here. He…” The senator pauses to catch his breath. That’s when I notice the red streaks on his shirt. I think it’s when he does, too. “You’re hurt. Let me help.”

“I don’t need your help!” I yell, cutting a glance at the door.

What was it my captor had said? Any one of thirty men could be my father. He’d simply taken what was offered…

“How did you get in here?” I demand, looking around for the man who’d lured me here from the start. “How did you have a key?”

“The owner of the house is an associate of mine.” He says, though it sounds more like a question than anything. “I know the door code.”

I can hear sirens in the distance, growing in pitch as they draw near. The fire still blazes through the darkness of the basement in my peripheral vision, but it’s blurry and tinged red, like the blood I shed is staining the whole world. “How did you have a key for the chain around my neck?”

“I didn’t.” He frowns. “I used bolt cutters to break it. What… how did you end up here?”

He doesn’t deserve an answer, and I won’t give him one. He can’t really expect me to believe Dimitri is such good friends with him that he’d call and ask him to walk into a situation he really had no idea about? I’m not buying it.

The sirens grow louder, and I hear the sound of vehicles approaching. “Dimitri is on his way—”

The senator shakes his head slowly, his eyes flickering to the door. I’m sure he’s assessing the situation, trying to come up with an explanation that will make sense to whatever authorities arrive. “Let me help you outside. You need to be taken to the hospital.”

“I don’t need anything from you!” I snap, making a quick move toward the open door.

Sunlight spills in from the open door, and in the middle of all of it is a familiar face.

It takes me a moment to pull through my memories, which are addled like my thoughts. I place it just as the senator draws up to my side, warmth cloaking my shoulders as he drapes a throw blanket over them.

Her name feels heavy and awkward on my tongue, and I wonder if I’m hallucinating. “Addie?”

“Get her out the back door!” The woman demands, looking at me like the gum under her shoe. The words are meant for the Senator, who hesitates for a moment, his eyes flickering from the woman to the fire truck that comes to a stop in the drive. “Now! I’ll deal with this!”

I’m too confused to even protest as the Senator wraps his arms around me and spins me in the opposite direction. “I’ll meet you at home.” She calls after him. “Don’t let her out of your sight!”

If I thought my world had caved in when the man told me I was the product of apparent gang rape, I was wrong. It didn’t cave completely—just narrowed enough to cut off my hopes of escape. But now, as I turn back to get a glance at this woman that I’ve known all my life, I realize there’s still room left for everything to collapse.

And so, I do.

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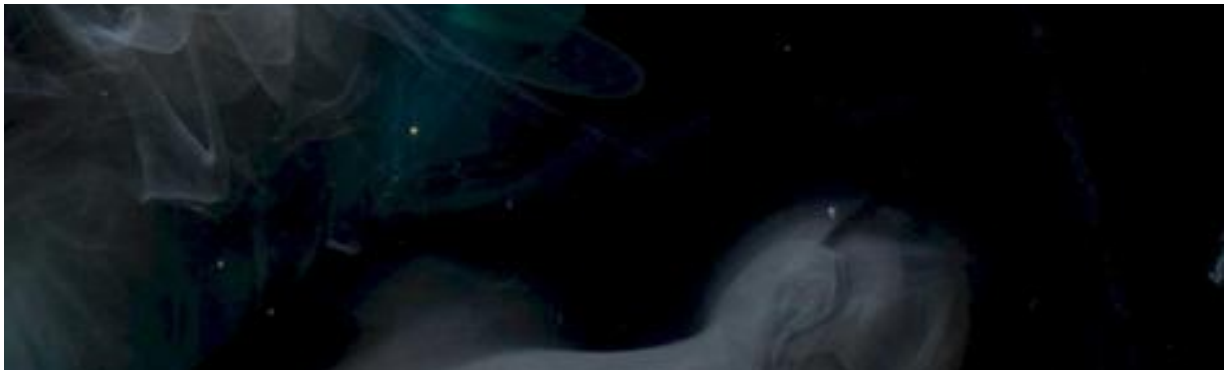

“She’s safe.”

I stare at Kent for a minute, not sure I heard him or if I just hallucinated that. He’s nodding, his face serious as he stands, letting out a long sigh. “Dimitri is on the ground. He’ll be with her in ten minutes or less. Massarini has her.”

All at once, all of the rage and fear that has been building up in me, doubling with each second that I imagined her slipping away from me, wooshes away from me. It happens so fast that I get a head rush and have to drop my head to abate the sudden dizziness as I drop back into the chair I started to rise from.

“You crying?” Wes mocks, chuckling. “That’s cute.”

“I’m not crying, fuckface. And I don’t have any use for you anymore, so you should watch your back as we get off the jet. My knife may just slip between your ribs.”

“Your girl turned you into a knife man?” He muses, not the least bothered by my threat. “She *is* particularly stabby. I’ve never known a woman to like knives as much as her.”

“You’d like them too if it gave you power over a limp dick man who uses you for his own enjoyment.”

“Bold of you to assume I haven’t needed power over a limp dick man before.” He taunts, plucking at his collar. “You’ve had it so easy your whole life, Boudreaux, and you don’t even see it.”

“Easy?” I snort. “Nothing about my life has been easy.”

“Sure.”

“There you go,” Wes laughs. It’s a derisive sound aimed to get under my skin, to spoil the relief I feel at the news that Claire is safe. “Always trying to play the victim, the martyr. You don’t even know what a real victim is.”

I’m not sure exactly which part triggers me to jump to my feet, ready to pummel him into the seat he’s in, because I’m on my feet before the last word even makes it past his lips.

“I don’t know what a real victim is?” I laugh too, matching him like for like. “Tell that to the sixty refugees under my care.” It occurs to me that it’s a lie—I haven’t cared for them at all—but I don’t backtrack. “Tell that to the men and women who were kept like cattle to be used for some sick, rich fucks to play with.” My voice cracks, and I work to get air through my nose. “I thought what I knew was bad and it’s only gotten so much fucking worse! I don’t know how, but it did.”

My stomach roils at the stench in Davos’ prison cells, at the a la carte menu emblazoned in my mind, at the sight of Kaia taking her last struggling breaths, the girl who John Smith had been violating from childhood. I’d thought it couldn’t get any worse than that, but it got worse in a different way. Meeting Violet, hearing Wes’ claim about what they did to her mother—to Claire’s mother. Ripping a child from its mother’s womb, let alone two children, and selling it off while its mother laid dying is a type of despicable my brain hasn’t even wrapped around yet.

Maybe because it’s not true.

This is Wes, after all. I have no reason to trust him, and every reason to hate him. He could have made the whole story up to fuck with my head. But even if he did, it can’t account for the fact that Violet exists, and she’s clearly a carbon copy of the woman I’d risk it all for.

“You found the castle?” His voice is quiet, almost awed, as he stares at me. “Did Army Ken Doll over there help with that?”

“Kent.” He corrects, enunciating the T. “And I sure as fuck did.”

“Sorry about your little playground.” I roll my eyes at him.

To my surprise, Wes doesn’t look angry. “Not my playground.” He shrugs. “I’ve never been there, but I can tell you, you just pissed off a lot of people. That target on your back is getting real big, brother. Even with new friends to watch your back for you, you’re playing with fire.”

“And I’ll let it burn me if it consumes the rest of it, too.”

“See? That’s your problem.” He drags a hand over his face, exasperated. “Exactly what I said… fucking martyr.”

“I’m not a martyr. I just care more about other people than myself.”

“What you are too stupid to understand, little brother, is that it’s not about *you*. It’s about the people you care about most. Tell me you aren’t in love with Claire.”

“I missed where you became my therapist.” I snap. “You charging for this sage advice?”

“Nah, let’s call it couples therapy. Army Ken Doll can play the role of therapist for us.”

“I’m good.” Crossing my arms over my chest, I sink back into my chair and check my watch. We have to be getting close. I only have to tolerate his incessant arrogance for a little while longer and then…

And then I’ll let him walk away and never see him again. I’d kill him if he weren’t Violet’s only person. I know nothing about her, and I’m not sure I want to, but she seems to trust him. I shift my focus to her as Wes watches me, his eyes following my line of sight.

“Beautiful, isn’t she?” He grins, looking proud of himself as if he has anything to do with that.

“Just wondering how you brainwashed her into trusting you.”

“I didn’t brainwash her. Our union was arranged.”

“Mmm.” I nod, uninterested despite the fact that I want to know more.

“Would you believe she is my father’s leftovers?” I bristle at the callous admission. “It’s a funny story, actually. See, my father didn’t raise me, but he made sure I was raised to be a surgeon. Doctors can be tricky in this line of work, you know, cause they’re an empathetic lot. *‘Do no harm’* and all that. It’s far easier to train them, to build them from scratch, than it is to convert them. So, I became the best in my class. Was I seeking his approval by being the best? Maybe.” He chuckles, glancing at Kent. “Army Ken, why aren’t you writing this down?”

“You need more help than I can give.” Kent deadpans, shaking his head.

Wes nods his agreement before turning back to me with a shrug. “I liked it, though. I *like* that moment of having your hands in someone, feeling their life force all around you, knowing that in that moment, you’re their only God. A slip of the scalpel and they’re dead. Knick the wrong artery and the lights don’t come back on. Deprive them of oxygen too long and their brain can turn off even when the rest of them stays warm. Plenty of

men like warm cunt that they can have whenever they want without having to deal with all the whining."

"Jesus Christ." Kent groans, tapping his knuckles against his brow, trying to control himself. Wes glances at him but doesn't stop him.

"I was a good surgeon. Then Claire fucking stabbed me through the hand…" he lifts his palm, showing the slight slope of his fingers. I hadn't noticed, but they tremble a little, as if he can't splay his hand open all the way. "I'd have been okay with a good surgeon, but it was days before I got medical help. By that time, I had nerve damage I can't reverse. I thought maybe that meant my career was over, but you know what my dad did? He made me get back on the horse."

"Violet was my first patient when I got back. She was already prepped, I didn't know anything about her other than the surgery I was to perform. I never even looked at her face the whole time… didn't need to, to take out her uterus."

I feel Kent's eyes slide to me, assessing my reaction. But I already know that sterilization is forced upon some of their captives. *It keeps them from getting distracted*, my father had explained once. *If they're not being bred, they don't need it anyway.*

"So, she was special to him."

"*Was*." Wes nods. "He loved those strong genes they got from their mother. He wanted to breed Violet—I bet he would have done the same with Claire if he'd actually gotten his hands on her, regardless of how much money it cost him. Only problem is, Violet never got knocked up. His other whores did, though. Oh yeah, we have lots of little fuckers running around who share our DNA." He adds the latter when my jaw tightens. "You think your father only let *mine* fuck our mom? No, they both fucked anyone and everyone he wanted. And who cares about the bastards born from it? I mean, it's literally called the Brotherhood." He laughs. "But Violet didn't give him the one thing he couldn't force her to give, so he punished her. Turned her over to me, told me to remove all the shit she didn't need, and then to congratulate me on a successful first surgery back, he gave her to me."

Wes' eyes turn to the woman next to him, who seems to be coming out of the sleep she's been in. "She almost died on my table… not by choice, mind you. She just wasn't in good enough shape to handle that kind of procedure. But she's a fighter."

That may be another thing that just runs in their DNA. I lean back in my seat, dragging a hand over my face. “I can’t keep doing this.”

The admission is more for myself than Wes, or maybe it’s for the universe. I repeat those words when he looks at me through thinned eyelids, suspicion coloring his gaze. It’s a revelation that I loathe to admit, but even just saying it, I feel like I can breathe again.

“I can’t keep doing this.” I say it louder this time, turning to Wes. “Are you sure I’m not a villain, *brother*?” I taunt. “Because I choose her.”

Wes only lifts an eyebrow, letting me continue to work through the thoughts unraveling in real time. “I never thought I’d sacrifice everything else for one person, but I’d let it all burn for her. I’ve seen the people that need me, but I can’t be there for them if it means depriving myself of the reason for my existence. I played their game for years, and it didn’t get me anywhere! I pushed people away—I pushed *her* away—because no one will ever be safe with me. And yet, I’m willing to take that chance because I can go all in to protect her.”

The smirk of Wes’ lips tells me he gets it. “Congratu-fucking-lations, brother. You’ve finally realized what you never seemed to understand before. What’s better? To love and lose, or to never love at all?”

“What?” My attention snaps to him, the confusion pulling me from the moment. “It’s better to have loved and lost because you can gut the bastards that take everything from you.”

He leans back, the smirk deepening with his satisfaction. “Maybe you don’t make a shitty bad guy after all. Bad guys can have their happy endings too, you know.”

I can. I feel it in my bones, taste it on my tongue. Maybe I’m high on the need for her, maybe I’m delirious from relief, maybe I’ve been driven to madness by all that I’ve seen. Whatever the reason, I can tell that it’s different now.

I’d thought I was going to have a happily ever after once, but I wasn’t willing to pay for it. It’s why I severed every connection I had to Monica, pushed away Genevieve even though she only tried to tolerate me, why I drove Claire out of my life even though I didn’t want to part from her.

I can tell Kent is biting his tongue, aghast at what I’m saying… that I’d turn my back on him, on everyone, for her. But if he doesn’t understand that he’s either a fool or he’s never been in love the way he claims he has.

“There’s still storehouses,” he reminds me. “Holding facilities, hostages and slaves that need us. We aren’t done.”

“I am.” I shrug, realizing how true it is as I say the words.

“You’re just going to abandon them?” Kent accuses. “After all that we did? You know that they’ve been asking about you. Everyone wants to meet the man that saved them, and you’re just going to run off and live your life like none of them ever happened?”

“Is this about them or you?” I slide my gaze to his, watching as his jaw grinds together.

“Fuck you!”

“Oh,” Wes straightens, leaning forward, and Violet blinks awake slowly to take in the exchange. “Is it my turn to play the therapist? I’m sensing another hero complex. Need me to break it for you?”

“If you turn your back on them, you’re every bit as fucked up as the rest of them.” Kent warns.

I shrug and lean back, relaxing with a newfound sense of peace. I’m going to get my girl, and I’m going to walk away from all of it. We can start over, in Oregon, in Costa Rica, in fucking Greece, if she wants. It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that I will have her.

“It’s fine.” I tell him as Kent pushes to stand and strides angrily past me. “If you want it so bad, I’ll give you everything. The keys to the kingdom, the kingdom itself. I don’t fucking want it.”

He doesn’t hear me as a door slams, and a moment later, I hear the wood groaning and splitting under his assault as he strikes it with punch after punch and an odd kick here and there.

It takes a few minutes, but once he’s done with his temper tantrum, Violet clears her throat. She’s sitting up now, her back straight, and in the light coming in through the window, she doesn’t look like the woman I met back in Mexico. There’s something dangerous about her when she leans toward me.

“What if you could have your cake and eat it too?”

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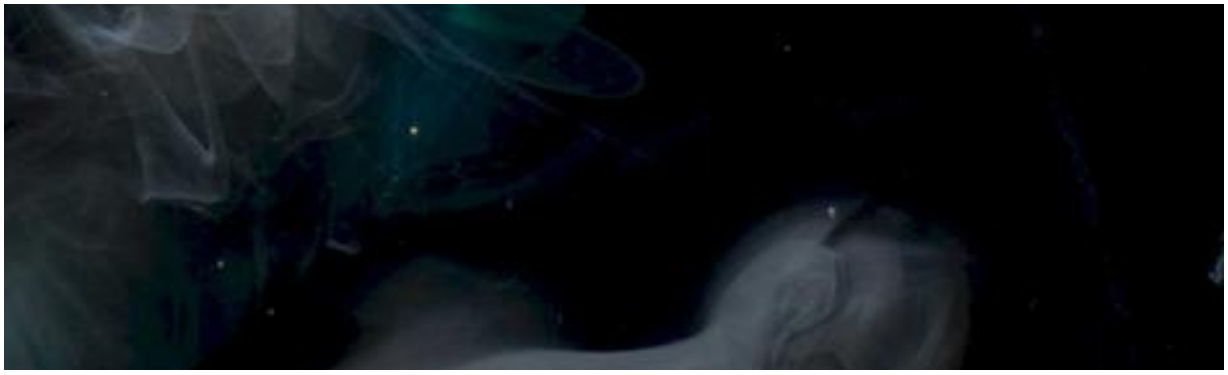

“Where are you taking me?” I demand, speaking for the first time since the senator practically forced me into the passenger seat of his car. I guess I should be glad it was this and not the trunk, but I still don’t trust him. What are the chances that he just showed up to the same place I was taken prisoner if he wasn’t somehow involved? And why the fuck was Addie there?

My head is spinning, my throat hurts, but the physical things are a good distraction for the fact that I feel a peculiar emptiness inside. The senator turns to look at me, eyes wide and full of some sort of emotion I can’t decipher. Maybe losing my emotions took away my ability to recognize other peoples’. Maybe he created a psychopath in that basement.

“You need a hospital.” He says, looking me over for a second longer before tearing his gaze from me and glancing out at the road ahead. I see his jaw tighten and a muscle there twitches, but he remains silent for a minute.

“I don’t.” I tell him. “I just need a shower… and a nap.” My eyes are heavy, but I know better than to let them close when I’m still in danger. Though I have to ask myself, do I care?

“You could have smoke inhalation… it can catch up to you hours after leaving the scene. And your neck…” He shakes his head, and I watch his Adam’s apple bob as he works hard to swallow. “Remington would kill me if I didn’t get you checked out.”

Remy.

I close my eyes for a moment, giving them some relief from the burning feeling. I wish I could cry, flush the dry, stinging feeling there, but it's like there's a door in my mind, like I've been thrown into the waiting room in my own head and had access to the rest of my brain taken from me.

"But Addie—" I wince at the word, which feels like sandpaper grinding inside my throat. "Said she'd meet you at home."

The senator is quiet so long that I have to open my eyes to see if he's still there… if I am. "I know." He says, when he sees me looking at him. "But we're not going there."

Somewhere deep in the base of my spine, I know that something is wrong. Addie was as much a safe space for me as any person could be growing up. That's not to say that she was motherly in the least, but she was the only constant in my ever-shifting world. Every time a new placement was made for me, it was Addie who picked me up, who delivered me to my next home, to the next family that was going to *try* to love me.

I learned early on that nobody could love me, but I let Rhea lull me into complacency, let myself think that someone could. This feeling now reminds me an awful lot of what it had been like the first few times I was old enough to realize what was happening… the first few times I had to say goodbye to someone I thought cared about me.

I don't even realize my eyes have closed until a phone ringing cuts through the quiet in my mind, and my eyelids peel back slowly to see the name on the car's monitor.

Dimitri.

When the senator hits the accept button, Dimitri's voice fills the car. "Where is she?"

"I got her out in time. I…" I watch his fingers curl and flex on the steering wheel as he thinks through his words. "It's bad. I mean, she's okay, but I—"

"Claire?"

"Dimitri." I say, just to let him know that I'm here. I can hear the rush of his breath across the line, a sound of relief.

"Are you okay? What happened? I saw the notification that you activated the tracker, but you didn't answer your phone…"

"I…" I don't even know how to explain the stupid decision I made to try and track down Wes all on my own.

When I'd lived in Remy's house last summer, strutting around in skintight dresses and wearing my scars like badges of honor, it had been so easy to believe myself to be a badass. A goddess fashioned from dirt and destruction who could rise up to give back what she'd gotten from those who wronged her. Being back in class the last semester, I'd lost sight of that woman, but I still longed for her every day.

It was stupid to think that I could be her when I was only playing at her with Wes. I wasn't in control then, no matter how much it had felt like it, because the situation was controlled. Trying to replicate that out here? Thinking that I could find Wes and use him to get to his father was asinine… and that's to say nothing of the illusion that I thought I could go after Davos.

Honestly, the man who locked me in his basement was probably a kinder fate than whatever would have awaited me at Davos' hand.

"Claire!" Dimitri's voice pierces the haze of my thoughts, but I bite my lip, still not sure what to say.

"I'm taking her to Washington General. She needs medical attention. I don't know…" His voice shakes. "I don't know what he did to her."

I can't tell if the senator is shaken up by the sight of me or if he's simply putting on a show. I don't know this guy, and Remy hadn't seemed to have anything to tell me of him. The fact that he's married to Addie should, theoretically, give me some peace, but I'm too confused by it to feel any certain way.

"I'm three minutes away." Dimitri says.

"We're two."

It feels like longer than two minutes, somehow, but the senator pulls up to a set of large glass doors and rushes around to my side. Dimitri is already there, opening the door and pulling me out into his chest.

"I can walk." I say, though I'm not sure that's true. There's nothing wrong with my feet, my legs, but my head doesn't feel right so I let it lay against his shoulder and allow my eyes to close as he carries me inside.

We're greeted by someone asking questions rapid-fire the moment we walk through the doors, and I don't know if the questions are for me or about me, but I ignore them all, drowning it all out as I let them move me around like a doll, positioning me where they need. I don't really see the face of the woman who stands before me, shining a light into my eyes and

pulling on my chin to part my mouth. I don't really think about anything, don't really see anything.

In my head, I'm still trying to get into the rest of my brain, to get access to myself. But all the doors are locked, and there's nothing in this place… no hurt, no pain, no joy.

It's a great white void.

"Why are you worried about smoke inhalation?" I hear someone ask, and I start to open my mouth to tell them I'm not worried, but someone speaks first.

"Because I pulled her out of the fire."

"Mmm. Taken to pulling people out of burning buildings these days, have you, senator?"

I don't hear if the senator says anything back to her before the woman disappears. It doesn't take long for Dimitri to fill the space she left, dropping to his knees in front of me so that he can get a good look.

"Claire." His voice is soft. "What happened?"

I open my mouth—I think I do—but no sound comes out, and then there's something being forced over my head. I jump, clawing at the chain before it can close into a loop, but hands force mine down, pinning me in place, and no sound still comes from my throat… no cries, no pleas, no scream.

A moment later, something is pressing against my face, smothering me, stealing my breath.

The woman is in front of me again, and her glossy orange lips are moving, so I force myself to still so that I can hear her saying something about breathing. She doesn't seem to realize I can't breathe when I'm being smothered, but I try anyway. She has a nice face, and the Scooby Doo characters on her top make me feel oddly secure. Bad people don't like Scooby Doo—he's the one who stops all the bad guys.

"Good." I hear the word a minute after her mouth turns into a smile, and she nods at me, pleased with whatever I've done. "You're doing great. Keep breathing."

So, I do. It's all I can manage. I can't think, can't find the energy to move, but I can breathe. It's a simple enough thing to do, and it pleases her the more I do it.

"Great job, sweetie." She says, and I'm suddenly aware of her hand on my back, rubbing small circles. Without explanation, my eyes fill with tears

that I blink back, and after a few moments, she pulls the strap from around my head. “I’m going to get some stuff to take care of your other injuries. Are you hurt anywhere else?”

I shake my head automatically, and she smiles and leaves the room again. It’s hard to breathe without her here—I feel like I forgot how to do it in her absence, but I don’t want to disappoint her, so I focus on taking breaths in through my nose, forcing air through my spasming throat.

God, it hurts.

“I’d like to speak with my patient alone.” The woman says as she comes back in, pushing a steel metal cart before her.

I don’t hear who objects, but someone says no, and my head turns in his direction. I’m vaguely surprised to see the senator still sitting next to Dimitri, leaning forward with his hands clasped together.

“I’m not leaving her.” Dimitri says, shaking his head.

“I wasn’t asking.” The woman’s voice is hard. “I can have security remove your ass from the whole hospital if you want me to? Or you can step outside for five minutes.”

“I—” Dimitri looks like he’s ready to fight her, but the Senator stands.

“Come on.”

Her stone façade drops the minute they pass through the door, and she turns back to me with a much softer disposition. “You’re really brave, Claire, but I think you’re lying. Are you sure you aren’t hurt anywhere else?”

“No.” I shake my head.

“Did those men hurt you?”

“No.”

“Did somebody else?”

I hesitate, not sure how to answer that. “Yes.”

“Was it someone you know?”

“No.” I say, but then a random voice in my head reminds me that that may not be true. It could have been my father.

“Do you feel safe with those men in your room?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” she nods. “But you came in without clothes on, and given the nature of your injuries, I have to ask if something else happened? Did somebody assault you?”

Again, I’m not sure how to answer that. I guess it depends on what sort of assault we mean. Seeing my hesitation, she nods. “I want to do a rape kit to make sure we get any evidence we might need.”

Rape kit.

The words make my heart speed up, my stomach clench. I shake my head, trying to tell her it won’t be necessary, but she tries again. “If someone hurt you like that, we need to get the—”

“No.” My voice is a croak, cracking over the weight of the single syllable. “They didn’t.”

I watch her swallow, looking like she wants to fight me on the matter again. “Are you sure? During my initial exam, I noticed bruising on your thighs… what little clothing you were wearing is torn. Maybe you just don’t remember it?”

“No.” It comes out unbroken this time. “I wasn’t… I just want to go home.”

The nurse manages a smile, nodding sympathetically.

But it doesn’t do anything to ease me into complacency or peace, because I suddenly realize…

I don’t even know where home is.

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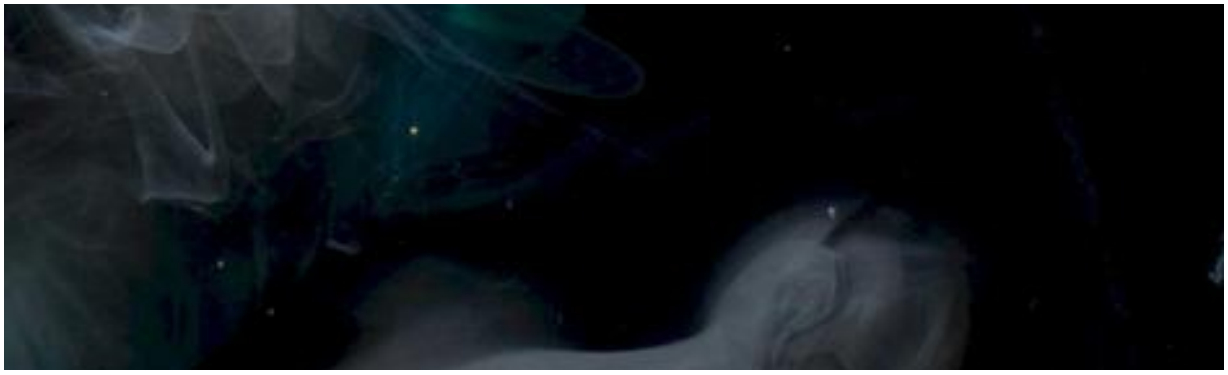

I rush through the doors while the world blurs around me, everyone turning into streaks of motion that look like strokes from a paint brush. A woman at the desk is speaking to me, and someone else is yelling somewhere, but I can't focus on any of them, can't hear what they're saying.

Kent told me she was *fine*.

He told me she was with the senator.

And then they brought me here.

I fucking hate hospitals, and I hate Kent for lying to me. My eyes snap from face to face, looking for one I recognize, looking for her. The waiting room is full of people, but none of them are Claire, so I push toward the desk, lifting the latch that will let me behind it. The angry voices start telling me I can't go back there, but then I see Dimitri standing there through the glass window ahead of me.

He runs to me, pushing the door from the inside so that it opens to allow me in. Except it doesn't open, and a man comes from nowhere, barring my path as he pushes me back by the shoulder. "You've got to sign in."

"Fuck you!" I snap. "Let me back there."

"Sign in." He snaps back, gesturing to the woman sitting at the desk watching me with wide eyes.

"I need your ID." She says, glancing nervously from me to the guard. "I can get you checked in while you go back there to visit your friend, but I need your ID."

“Take it!” I say, slipping my wallet from my pocket and tossing it across the distance to her. “Take the whole thing, just let me through!”

The man in my path is starting to say something, but then I hear the click of the lock giving way, so I rush past him.

“What the fuck happened?” I shout at Dimitri, who is already turning his back to me so he can lead me to her. I had security on her for months— her every move has been watched since she left Costa Rica. Is it really a coincidence that the minute her guard had to dip, she got taken?

“Carrington Hardin,” Dimitri explains, rounding a corner and picking up his pace. I see the senator standing outside a closed door, raking his hands through his hair. It does nothing to ease the tension in every part of me, so I run the rest of the way.

The senator is trying to speak to me when I throw the door open, and there’s a series of objections from various faceless people, but I don’t let any of it stop me. I sprint across the distance to her, barely getting a glance at her sitting up staring at me before I wrap her in my arms.

The minute she’s against me, it’s like fitting a puzzle piece into the last spot. My entire body sags in relief as I press kisses against the top of her head, the relief in my chest so violent that I think it may burst outward. “Claire.” Her name is sweet on my tongue, muffled against her skin. “Fuck, I’m so sorry. I’m sorry I let you go. I never should have let you leave. I should have owned up to my feelings instead of pushing you away. I—”

The aggressive throat clearing behind me alerts me to the fact that someone is trying to get my attention, but I don’t fucking care. They can go to hell.

I pull away from her just enough to slide my palms under her chin so I can look her in the eye and tell her that I am in love with her, but I stop cold when the shift lets me see the purple marks around her neck, bruising covered in blood.

My eyes flick to hers, preparing to ask if she’s okay. But I don’t have to ask that to know the answer is no. Her eyes are steady on me, and she doesn’t blink as I tilt her head up again to inspect the bruising—the pattern of it. That’s not the most disconcerting thing. The thing that is most unsettling is the whites of her eyes—the blood vessels that burst in them, making her eyes red.

Horror sinks straight through me, gripping me in its claws as I stare at her, and she stares back at me blankly. That’s when I notice she hasn’t

hugged me back, she hasn't reached out for me, hasn't said a word. I cradle her against my chest before she can see the tears threatening to form and hope she doesn't notice I'm shaking.

"What happened?"

The nurse is looking at me like she wants to throw me out into the middle of a busy highway, but when Dimitri and Victor come further into the room, she seems to accept my presence. "I was trying to figure that out myself. The doctor hasn't seen her yet, but from what I can tell, she was manually strangled… maybe with some kind of chain. I don't know if it was part of a larger assault, but maybe her attacker thought she was dead and tried to set a fire. She was showing significant signs of smoke inhalation… confusion, disorientation, shock… that's all normal with smoke inhalation or carbon monoxide poisoning. She refused a rape kit, so I can't really tell you anything more."

I think I may pass out—it suddenly doesn't feel like I'm breathing right anymore. I'm scared to take any deeper breaths lest it jostle her around against me. The nurse looks around us all. "She said she felt safe with you, so I'll give you guys a moment, but don't try anything stupid. The doctor will be in any minute now."

No one says anything as she walks out, pulling the door closed behind her. I watch as the senator presses a hand to his mouth, and I don't know if he's trying to contain a scream or vomit.

"Claire…"

I drop in front of her, not letting my touch leave her cold skin, and steady her face in my hand, making her look at me… making myself look at her.

Seeing the scars on Violet's face had been a terror all its own— knowing that at some point in time someone had taken a blade to her skin with every intent of marking her forever. When I'd thought it was Claire, it was awful, because it meant someone had hurt her, but at least the marks were faint, fading. Now, Claire bears the evidence of a recent attack—pain that hasn't even begun to heal.

"Tell me what happened, sweetheart." Her lips are parted, but she doesn't seem to try to get any words past them. She stares at me like I'm a fixed point, like I'm not moving in front of her, begging her to see me. "It's okay," I tell her. "You can tell me, anything. Did he—?"

"Dimitri called me while I was on my way to dinner with my wife." Victor explains, stealing my attention. "He told me that he thought she was

in trouble and gave me the coordinates. It was a friend's house." He shakes his head, like he can't even believe he just said that. "When I got there, no one was home, but we have the code… we've known each other for years, house sat for them on occasion. I let myself in, just to see, and I could hear the fire in the basement. I—" Dragging a hand over his face, he tries to compose himself. "I broke down the door, because Dimitri said she was there, and she was."

He turns to Dimitri, seeking an explanation as to how he knew where to find her. He presses his lips together, like he's trying to figure out how to deliver news I won't like. "When you sent me after her last summer, before Moose, I gave her an air tag. Told her to authorize me as a user, and if she ever felt unsafe, to turn my access on. I got a notification that she used it, but she wasn't answering the phone, so I knew something was wrong. I was on my way before you even knew she was in danger."

I stare at him, unsure whether I should be impressed or annoyed. "An air tag? You mean, you tracked her like *luggage*?" Victor sounds appalled.

"And she just happened to have it on her *and* have time to access it while she was being kidnapped?"

Dimitri lets out a measured breath. "I don't know. I—"

"He didn't… kidnap… me." Claire's words are a jumble, the cadence all wrong and the pauses for her to breathe in the wrong spaces. We all turn our attention to her, hoping she'll elaborate.

"What do you mean?"

"He… didn't. I went… to him."

I'm staring at her, trying to make those words make sense, when she sucks in a deep gasp. I look around for the source of her pain, expecting that some kind of physical discomfort has broken through. I'm already turning to call for the nurse and demand more pain meds when I hear her final gasp, a release of air that got trapped somewhere in her.

It gives me just enough pause to turn back to her as she goes limp, and her eyes roll back.

I catch the back of her head before she can fall.

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None of us have said a word since the doctor rushed into the room and called out for the staff to help him. The last woman in pushed me the rest of

the way out of the room—I went easily, unable to gain control of my body—and shut the door behind them.

It's been silent—I haven't heard a single sound since that door shut, taking all the noise and my air like we're in a vacuum.

"She killed him." Victor finally says, like he's just realized it.

"Good." I growl. "I'll have his body recovered so I can feed him to the fucking wolves. Fucker can rest in pieces."

"What did he do to her that she had to kill him?" He sounds like he may be sick, his voice heavy with disbelief.

I want to sink my fist into a wall, but I'm not taking the chance of getting kicked out if the nurse decides to follow through on her earlier threat. "You're in it now. You fucking *know* what they're capable of."

"But, I— do you think he was one of… *them*?"

I don't just think—I know.

Michael dug into Evan Ludlow for me while I was on the way here, after Dimitri texted him with the name to look into. He seemed like a random sadist, at first, until Michael discovered where he worked.

Ludlow used the cover of one of his associates in the auction. This whole time, I've been worried about Carrington Hardin, but the real threat was his boss. I doubt Hardin even knows his identity was stolen and used to fund sex slavery.

I don't have the energy to explain it to any of them right now. Part of me is pissed that Dimitri didn't notice it when he did his reconnaissance, but the larger part of me knows Ludlow was smart. His financial portfolio revealed large stakes in Boulder Tech, so I'm willing to bet every penny in all of his accounts that he was able to work around a lot of security protocols, just in case anyone ever started asking questions. He was willing to throw his employees under the bus and implicate them in violent crimes, but that's not really a surprise given everything else I know him to be capable of.

"How did the fire start, though?" Dimitri asks, I think more to himself than either of us.

"Electrical, I think? She was chained to something like a fucking hoist system, and it was motorized. I don't know." He looks like he's about to be sick again, and I can't even blame him. The thought of her hanging in his basement like cattle for slaughter makes me want to carve out the insides of

any man who so much as looks at her. “Only Claire can tell us what happened in there, but you can’t be thinking of asking her?”

“No.” I answer for him, swallowing my disgust. “Whatever happened in that basement is her business. She doesn’t tell us anything she doesn’t want to, and nobody fucking asks. Understood?”

Victor looks like he’s going to protest, but he catches my eye and nods instead.

We’re quiet again, and the anxiety is unraveling inside of me. It shouldn’t be taking this long, should it?

I’m grateful when the ringing pulls me out of my head, but for one horrible moment, I think it’s the flat drone of a machine that’s not detecting a heart rhythm.

And then Victor slides the phone against his ear. He doesn’t say anything; the voice on the other end of the line begins immediately. It’s so loud I can’t not hear her—his wife. “Where the hell are you?”

I see the senator’s eyes sweeping the hospital walls, trying to come up with an answer. “Police station.” He says finally. “I brought her here to make a statement. Evan’s dead… we need to work on her defense.”

“The police station?” His wife screams. “You fucking idiot. Get the fuck out of there. They don’t know she was even there! Bring her home, right now!”

“I will.” He says gently. His behavior is so at odds with hers, it makes everything feel even more surreal. “She’s with an officer now. As soon as she’s done, I’ll bring her back to the house. You’ll make up a room for her?”

“Yes, Rose will get everything ready. Just… don’t let her tell them anything that will come back to hurt us.”

I watch his face crumple, but he works hard to keep his voice neutral. “Why would anything come back to hurt us, Addison?”

“You found a girl chained up in someone’s basement!” She shrieks. “That’s not a good look for us, Vic. Evan worked for us for years… his wife babysits our boys. I’m sure whatever happened, this is all just a misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding.” He nods, dragging a hand over his face. “Yeah, I’m sure nothing nefarious happened.” The sarcasm is obvious to me, but his wife is happy to accept his agreement.

“It was probably a little light BDSM. You know he and Kristen opened their marriage. She’s probably just a new pet.”

“A pet.” The senator echoes. “Right. I have to go.”

I hear Addison’s protests, but it doesn’t stop Victor from ending the call. His eyes find me watching him. He’s quiet a moment, and I don’t have the energy to pay him any mind. I’m already turning away from him to stare at the door when he speaks.

“She recognized her.”

I turn back to glance at him, trying to make sense of whatever he just said. “What?”

“Claire.” He swallows, placing a hand against the brick wall to steady himself. I catch his eyes lingering on his wedding band, like he’s wary it may brand him suddenly. “Claire recognized my wife.”

“Like… from pictures?” Dimitri asks, glancing between the two of us.

“No…” Victor punctuates the word with a slow shake of his head. “No, she *knew* her. She called her Addie.”

I’m not sure what he’s getting at, until an old memory unlocks in my mind. The first time I took Claire out on my boat, when I’d been so convinced that she was hiding something from me, I’d demanded she tell me things. She *had* been hiding things, it turned out, just not the things I expected she was.

“My social worker, Addie, was there when I woke up in the hospital.”

Addie. She was the one constant in Claire’s life, she got her out of the psych hold of her attempted suicide, she told her to emancipate herself. And she got Claire moved up the admissions list at a prestigious University.

I hadn’t bothered to ask, back then, how a social worker would be capable of doing these things. But now I know, a social worker couldn’t have managed all that alone. And burying the police records from the night Claire was removed from the Giante’s home? A social worker couldn’t do that.

But I know damn well a senator’s wife could have done it.

“Fuck.” I say, all the terrible pieces to an ugly puzzle falling into place right in front of me. My eyes flick up to find him staring at me, awaiting whatever revelation I just had. He’s not ready for it—I’m about to blow his world apart, but I can’t bring myself to worry about him. “You said your wife was Lauren’s guardian?”

Victor nods, and I can see him trying to figure out the puzzle I already solved. “Fuck,” I say again. I feel like I may throw up, but I push it down as I turn to the man I’m sure is Claire’s father. “I could be wrong, but I think I know what happened to Lauren all those years ago.”

Desperation is a sad look on him, but I imagine I’m wearing it just as poorly right now. I just need them to open the doors, to tell me she is going to be okay, to let me hold her.

“Your wife had her murdered to keep your daughters from you.”

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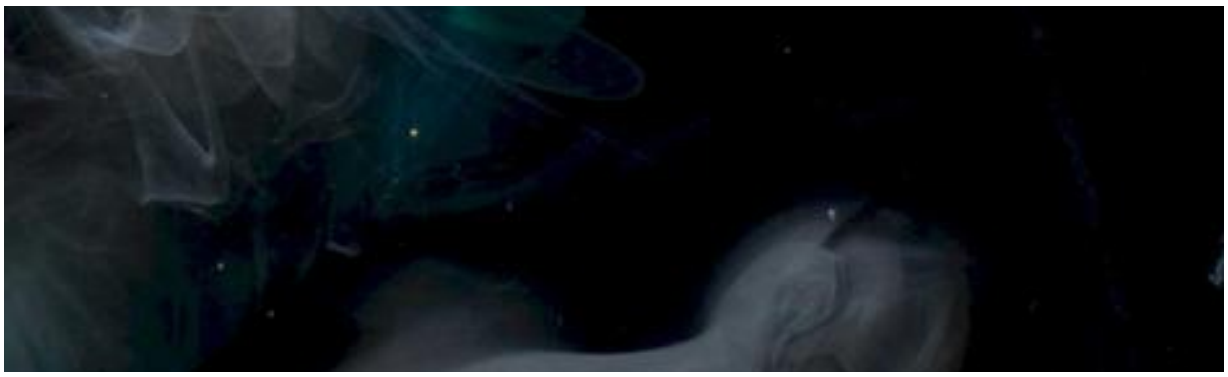

I woke up a few times in the hospital with Remy’s arms around me, and since we left the hospital, he’s been at my side every waking moment… and presumably the ones where I’m asleep. I haven’t gotten the courage to face him yet. I don’t know how to tell him what I know to be true… the matter of how I came to be. I haven’t figured out how to tell him that I am a void, that I can’t give him any of the things he wants from me. I haven’t figured out how to tell him that when I broke this time, some of the pieces got left behind… that they went up in flames in the basement of a man I don’t even know the name of.

I don’t know how much time has passed since we left the hospital. I just know that sometimes I am awake, but my brain isn’t. The rest of the time, we’re both asleep. I can feel the weight of him against me, but never his warmth.

I don’t know why he brought me to a hotel, why he keeps ordering food I have no interest in eating, why he keeps telling me he’s sorry.

“Claire?” His sleepy voice makes me still as I’m trying to slip out of his hold. I pause, my feet dangling above the ground. A little slip of light that crept in through the blackout drapes forms a line on the floor pointing right toward the exit, and part of me wants to run toward it. His hand gravitates to the back of my neck, and I hear the mattress croak in protest as he moves toward me.

When his touch slips down my arm, his thumb coasting down to stop just above the bruising on my wrists, I jump up and run to the bathroom, putting

as much space as possible between us.

I love him. Even though I can't feel anything, I know that I do… or I did, before I lost all of my emotions. It's why I know he isn't trying to hurt me, and yet I can't stand his touch right now. I can't stand him hovering, coddling, encompassing me.

I'm suffocating, drowning, and I can't tell him.

The smoke in my lungs feels like it reached deeper than they told me. It feels like it slipped all the way through me, like it turned my insides dark and rotten. Talking hurts too much, and the feeling of the chain around my neck weighs me down.

I lock the door behind me as his footsteps approach and walk to the sink to get as far away from him as I can. I see a sliver of myself in the mirror as I approach, and something in me tells me to turn the light on.

It must be the masochist inside me, the part of me that needs to suffer, that told me to do it, because I have to fight back a gasp when I do.

This is the first time I've looked in a mirror since before I went to that house of horrors, and I should have never done it. The harsh incandescent lighting does nothing for my pallor, and it makes the red splotches across my skin all the more prominent. Broken capillaries run under my skin like a road map going nowhere and everywhere all at once, my nose is black and blue and not the exact shape I remember, and the pool of blood on the white of my eye looks like it should be dripping past my lashes. But none of that is as bad as my neck—the chains left a stamp on my skin—purple bruises in the exact shape of the links that had cut off my air supply.

I think of his words when he first left me to strangle. *"You were such a pretty shade of red when he choked you, but I always favored purple."*

"Claire!" Remy's voice comes to me through the door, pulling me from the memory of being left to hang. "Are you okay?"

My eyes track the marks of the chain, disappearing behind my neck, so I turn to see them from another angle. The loose neck of my pajama top reveals a hint of a blue bruise on the top of my shoulder, so I find the buttons, curious to see the damage. I remember him grinding me into the brick wall on his front porch, trying to conceal me from the view of the camera. I wonder if it dislocated then or in the basement, when my arms had been jerked over my head. The nurse popped it back in place before Remy showed up, and the pain had been immediate, but so was the relief.

When I let my top fall to the ground, the bruise wraps around the shoulder and tapers off near my shoulder blade, where it is already yellowing.

“Such pretty skin. It will be beautiful, covered in my marks… red that fades to blue and purple. I will make art out of you.”

I appraise myself, taking in both the marks he left upon me, and the ones left last year by Slick’s blade. My body doesn’t feel like my own. I’m not sure it ever has.

“Claire!” Remy’s voice is more urgent this time, his knocking harder. “Are you alright?”

I slip my fingers in the waistband of my bottoms, pulling them free and letting them drop on the floor, too. Just one thigh bears the proof of his touch, faint blue fingermarks disappearing in the space between my thighs. *“Call me daddy either way.”*

Nausea swells through me, but I haven’t eaten in hours or days, I don’t know. Regardless, nothing comes up when I heave into the sink, the dry retching making my sore throat scream in pain. “God damn it, Claire, you have three seconds before I beat this door down. Just talk to me.”

The world gets a little darker, so I grip the counter tighter, just so I don’t go down and bust my head on the granite.

I don’t even realize he got the door open until I catch Remy’s reflection in the mirror. He pauses, coming to a dead stop when he sees me naked in front of the sink.

“Claire?”

I don’t know if the stranger took my voice or if that was all the smoke I inhaled, but I can’t speak even if I tried, so I don’t even attempt to answer him.

“Jesus, you’re shaking.” His voice is in my ear, and then he’s wrapping me against him. “Are you cold?”

Not sure how to answer that, I shake my head. I don’t feel cold, or hot. I just don’t feel.

“You’re freezing!” He scolds me, rubbing his arms over mine. “God, Claire. What can I do?”

He knows I won’t answer him, and maybe it was a rhetorical question anyway, because he pushes me away from him for just a fraction of a second, spinning me to face him. When he folds me against his stomach, the pressure on my shoulder makes me gasp.

He pulls away so quickly you'd think I burnt him, and I think he's sick of me, that he's going to leave me to stew in my despair, but he crosses to the garden tub and begins to run water from one of the taps. I watch as he motions me forward, and somehow, my body obeys the command, my feet pushing me toward him. He doesn't even slip his boxers off as he lifts me in his arms, cocooning me into him, and sinks into the water with me.

The splash of the water over our bodies is the only sound for a while as he threads his fingers through mine and holds me tightly to his chest. When it reaches the top of the overflow drain, neither of us moves to turn it off, instead letting it continue to pour and continue to drain out slowly.

It takes a long time—I'm almost asleep by the time I realize it—but eventually, I realize I can feel Remy's heartbeat against the back of my chest. It's an almost disconcerting realization that has me nearly move away from him, but I don't have the energy, so I stay still, feeling each beat through his chest and into mine. I didn't realize mine was racing until I notice it slowing down, the jittery feeling fluttering through me in its wake as it eases into a pattern that matches his.

Letting my head fall back against his shoulder, I relax, closing my eyes. The water is surprisingly warm as it falls around my feet—only the tips of my toes poke through the surface… turquoise, from when we painted them before our vacation to Florida. That feels like a lifetime ago.

"I love you."

It's a whisper, like maybe he's afraid to say it any louder, but there's no mistaking what words he spoke.

I sit with that confession for a moment, not sure what to say in response, not sure if I can say anything at all. My throat feels swollen, still raw, and I don't know if it's from all the screaming I did or all the screams that got trapped inside me.

Remy pushes me off of him, and I imagine he's grown tired of talking to himself, but he's only angling me to face him before pulling me against him once more. Two fingers catch the edge of my jaw, and he tilts it so that his eyes can meet mine.

"I love you, Claire. I am *in love* with you. And I'm so sorry that I pushed you away. If I had just found the courage to let myself love you, this wouldn't have happened. I can't make you understand how much I regret that, but I am willing to spend the rest of my life trying."

I sweep his eyes—the beautiful amber, the deep brown, the sincerity. If the eyes are the window to the soul, he’s bearing his soul to me in this moment, letting me see him in abject honesty, with no walls between us. He’s giving me something that I can’t give him back. I’m trying to make sound move past my lips, but he doesn’t give me the chance, catching my mouth with his.

It's slow and delicate, just like his touch has been since he found me. I can taste all of the hopes in him, all of the things he still wants to say, his hunger for this moment. He’s regarding me like a priceless thing, a sculpture made of glass.

“I will make art out of you.”

My hand slips around his neck, tangling in the hair at the base of his skull as I pull him deeper into me. I feel the resistance, the hesitation, the need to be gentle warring with the need to give in to what he wants. My kiss is hungry, desperate, pleading.

And he gives me what I want, pulling me closer, holding me tighter, kissing me harder. I feel the ridge of his cock tightening beneath me, and a small moan escapes me as I slide myself over it.

As if realizing he’s done something wrong, Remy suddenly snaps out of it, pushing me off of him. I don’t go far, slipping off his lap with my lips swollen, my chest aching, and my eyes burning.

“Harder.” I force the word through my throat, needing him to hear it, to know what I want… what I need.

I watch his fingers curl into a fist and then he runs his palm over his face, looking like he’s trying to wipe away his frustration. “Did you not hear me? I love you. I fucking love you and I—”

I don’t give him a chance to say anything more, launching myself at him and settling over his lap. He tilts his head back, his bewildered gaze meeting mine. Whatever he sees in it, he surrenders, gripping the nape of my neck, pinning me in place with one hand while he frees his cock from his boxers with the other.

He lines himself up with my entrance, but I assume control, sinking down onto his length, letting him fill me in a way I didn’t realize was possible anymore. The hollowness is chased away as I slide down on him, taking everything he has to offer, letting myself feel him sheathed inside me before I retreat.

I stay focused on him as I work, his head dropping back against the edge of the tub, his eyes rolling to a close and then slowly working open so he can take me in. My wet hair drips onto his face as I look down at him, admiring the view, the sensation of the water slapping around us, propelled forward and back with each of my thrusts.

It's slow to start, gentle while I explore, and then I grip his hair, forcing his head back against the tile, his throat out like an offering I intend to take as I use the leverage to ride him harder. My kiss on his throat is similarly gentle, at first, but by the time my lips make it to his, there's nothing gentle about it. I'm biting him, clawing at his scalp, devouring him in every way I can. And he seems to enjoy the meal I'm making of him, deep gasps of pleasure rolling from him as I work my hips faster.

When I press my hips against him, tilting my pelvis downward, the friction makes me nearly detonate. My gasp is just as needy as his when I find that sweet spot, and I redouble my efforts, grinding over his cock until he's barely hanging on, his teeth are bared, and the expression on his face has turned to one of pain. And then I make him suffer a moment longer while I find my orgasm, stoking the fire inside both of us at the same time.

We come together, his nails in my back and my teeth wrapped around his lower lip, both of us a gasping, wet mess. He doesn't make a move to disentangle himself from me, and I don't make a move to slide off of him, enjoying the moment for just a little longer.

Remy smiles as he reaches his hand up to trace my lips, which ache from the loss of him. "I love you." He says again.

And just like that, I slip off him, leaving me empty again.

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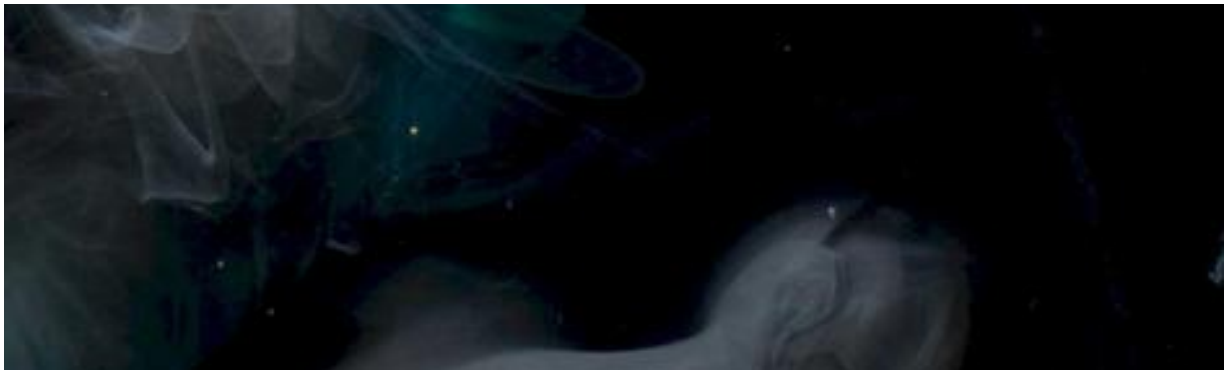

I don’t understand. I’m giving her what she wants… what she needs. And I genuinely meant it.

The truth is, there’s a whole mess of shit we have to deal with, but I can’t get through to her. It’s like she isn’t really here, in front of me… like she’s a ghost. It’s fucking with my head.

“Claire.” I want to shake her until she looks at me. I wonder vaguely if her being choked so brutally to bust blood vessels could have also caused ear drum rupture, because she doesn’t seem to hear me when I follow her out into the hotel room.

“Please.” I manage, not sure I can get another word through without it fracturing.

But she continues to ignore me, staring out the window into the courtyard below us. “This hurts.” I tell her, not sure why I’ve decided to be so vulnerable. Maybe because it doesn’t matter if I let myself show it, since she’s holding my heart no matter whether I admit it or not. “Please, talk to me.”

She doesn’t move as I step behind her, framing her against the smooth glass of the window. I rest my head on the top of hers, taking comfort that she won’t give me. I don’t know what happened to her in that basement, and I only want to know as far as she wants me to. But this version of her—cold, unfeeling, numb? It scares the hell out of me.

The night I demanded she tell me about Giante, I’d seen this version of her for just a fraction of a second. And I saw this version of her for a

moment, on the boat, when she handed the gun back to me, calling me on my bluff. This version of her stood in front of me and told me she was leaving me. I know this is who she is when she needs to protect herself, but I don't want her to be like this with me. I am the person who will go to any length to protect her. Maybe I've failed at that more times than I care to admit, but I'm done failing her. I'm done letting fear control my life, done giving everybody else my attention when all I want is to spend it on her.

"If you won't talk to me, maybe you will listen?"

She doesn't move, doesn't indicate she heard me, but I have no other option, so I take it as a yes and begin to talk.

"I lied to you. I lied to you, and I am so sorry I couldn't be honest. I was scared to tell you the truth, scared to open up old wounds, but I made you cut yourself open right in front of me. I'm a piece of shit, but when we met, I didn't know you would get under my skin. I didn't know I would fall in love with you!"

In the glass panel, I see her eyes watching me, assessing. It gives me the courage to delve deeper, to tear myself apart further. "When my father pulled me into this world, he told me that we breed our soldiers. Davos knocked me out, drugged me, and sent one of his woman in to fuck me… one that he knew was ovulating."

My throat threatens to close on me, or maybe to fill with bile, but I ignore the protesting, taking a small breath before I continue. "Her name was Genevieve, and he knew her well. When I got to Costa Rica, she was waiting for me. My wife."

My jaw feels like it may snap in half and ricochet right through my skull. "I hated her, and she hated me. I was a fucking monster to her, because she represented my fucking prison. It wasn't her fault—they forced her to do it all. She wasn't free to choose… and when I found out that their sick fucking plan had worked and she was pregnant, I just hated her all the more. Not only did I have a wife I never wanted, but I was going to be saddled with a child from her too?" I scoff, wishing (not for the first time) that I could go back and undo the past. "I didn't know she felt exactly the same way. She hated me as much as I hated her… and she hated our child… my son."

My eyes are burning with the tears I'm trying to fight, and I can feel them slipping down the back of my throat as I work to swallow my weakness. "I

found her one day, when she was a few months along… she'd…" I bite my lip, trying to man the fuck up. "She tried to cut him out of her."

Saying the words makes me feel faint. It's the first I've ever said them aloud, and I can't try to block the memory of her in a pool of blood while I'm saying the words. Other than Genevieve herself and Rook, nobody knows what happened… nobody else has had to live with that horrible image in their head. And now I'm imparting it upon the woman I love, because she deserves the truth.

"He didn't make it. Too tiny, too…" I wipe angrily beneath my eyes, chasing away the weakness slipping out from inside me. "I buried my son, and I thought about killing her. I really fucking wanted to."

I haven't tried to find her reflection, to see if she's watching me with horror or pity. She's still, her breaths coming in a steady rise and fall against me. "I almost did, but I stopped myself. I sent her away instead, told my father I'd killed her. They were going to send me another, just like she was nothing, a thing that could be so easily replaced. That's when I bought my first girl… I fed the illusion, bid on her. And when it was safe to do so, when they were beginning to ask why she wasn't pregnant yet, I set her free."

I squeeze my temples, trying to soothe the raging pulse there. "I faked her death, too, and I bought myself some time. But I couldn't get away with it forever. When I did it the third time, my father decided to pay me a visit, to keep an eye on me. I played my cards right, tiptoed around the subject… and one night, I heard him on the phone, making the deal with the devil. He sold my sister… said that Davos could take her in exchange for forgiving his debts, and promised he wouldn't fight him on the matter. I killed him that night."

If she's surprised to learn that I am responsible for my own father's murder, Claire doesn't show it, so I keep going. "That made her a target, so I went to bring her to Costa Rica so that I could keep an eye on her… that's when I met you. That night in my room, I thought you were one of Davos' presents. I thought he'd sent you to get close to me, or her. By the time I realized you weren't his pawn, it was too late. I'd driven you away the first time, and I fucking hated myself for it. When I got the video of you for the auction—" My voice breaks again, and I hit my fist against the glass, trying to compose myself. "I was willing to do anything to get you back, to fix it. And I did get you back… but I didn't know that you would want me—

fucking *me*—" I laugh, "for anything real. I didn't know that you would entertain a future with me… kids, marriage. For years, I convinced myself I couldn't have it. I *wouldn't* have it, if only to spite my father and Davos. I pushed you away because I was scared that I *wanted* those things with you. It was cowardly, pathetic. I wanted you to go as much as I wanted you to stay, but once you did, I fell apart."

My hand comes to rest on her shoulder—the non-injured one—and I appreciate that she doesn't push it off her. "I sent Dimitri after you the minute he was home that day, and I hired Moose right after that. Rhea stayed with me because we had business to finish, and I put on a show in front of her, but once she was gone… once I was alone…" I shake my head. "I knew I fucked up the minute you stepped onto that plane, but I also knew that I had to let you go, because I wasn't willing to give you what you wanted… what you deserved."

Our eyes meet in the reflection, and my chest constricts at the neutral expression on her face. "I've spent the last few months trying to tip the scales, to do some good. I've been to places you can't imagine, seen things…" I swallow the rest of that sentence and press my mouth to the space just below her ear. "I'm ready now, to give you what you want. I love you."

Hope surges inside me as she turns to face me, sliding her arms around my neck so that she can pull me closer to her. Her voice is choked when she speaks, the sound faint and quiet. I draw closer to hear whatever she's trying to say, but her words obliterate me.

"I… can never… love you."

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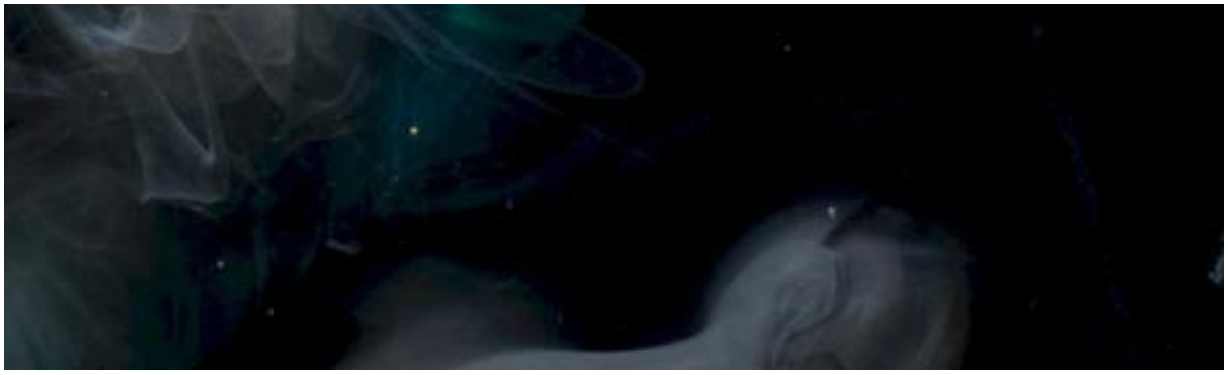

Rhea bursts through the door so suddenly, I think it may fly off the hinges. She stills completely when she sees me sitting at the little table, my hair pulled back in a clip that doesn't do much to hide the bruises on my neck.

"Oh my God." She cries, rushing at me full force. I bristle just before she can throw herself at me, and it gives her enough pause to stop herself before she collides with me. "Oh, Claire." I watch her press her shaking hand to her mouth, pull it away like she means to speak, and then press it to her mouth again.

"Rhea." I swallow, lubricating my throat again to make whatever else I have to say easier. I've gained my voice back a little—the swelling has gone down enough to make my words come out in the proper amount of syllables, though it is still mostly a whisper… a hoarse whisper.

"What happened to you? I woke up and you were gone. You just—nobody told me anything. I don't understand. Dimitri said it was the buyer from the auction, but he didn't tell me how he found you or what—" her words come to a stop as she takes me in with more attention.

"I found him." The words make my throat ache, but I take a sip from the water next to me and try to make the rest of the words come out smoother. "But he knew I was coming."

Because he led me to him, like Gretel following breadcrumbs to the house made of sweets so she could be stuffed into the oven. I'm so stupid. "I gave Dimitri access to my location, and he knew that meant to use it."

She stares at me for a moment, contemplating it. “Who was this guy? Just some sicko?”

It would be easier to just admit to that than to say he may have been my fucking biological father, but I shake my head. “He raped my mother.”

Rhea stills so completely I wonder if my brain is glitching. I’m not sure if she even breathes as she lets the words marinate. “What? How do you—?”

“He told me. He said it could be him or thirty other men who got her pregnant with me.”

I’m being indelicate, insensitive to her feelings. But I don’t have the energy to sugarcoat the ugly truth, and the parsed words I do give her feel like I’m swallowing a cheese grater.

Her jaw falls open and she presses a hand to her stomach. I watch her mouth move for a minute, floundering around for words that won’t mean anything. “I-I’m so sorry. Did he—?”

He hurt me in many ways, the worst of which was telling me that I came from a place so sinister, a person so despicable, that it’s shaken everything I know about who I think I am. But I shake my head anyways, because I know what type of hurt she’s asking about.

I don’t know if it is luck that he had something to deal with, or if that was just part of his sick game, to leave me stewing in my terror, my hatred, my disgust. She’s obviously relieved at the news, but she doesn’t let too much of it show. “Are you okay?”

Rhea knows that’s a stupid question to ask, but it doesn’t stop her. I know it’s rude to tell her that was a stupid question, but it doesn’t stop me.

When the words leave my mouth, she looks like I’ve slapped her. Shock pulls at her lips, parting them for a moment before she shakes her head. “No, you’re right. I’m sorry, that was dumb. I haven’t slept much. I—”

“You haven’t slept much?” I laugh, and then wince at the ache it causes. “Boo-hoo.”

A crease forms between her eyebrows as she stares at me, trying to decide whether I’m playing with her or not. But I’m not joking. I can’t muster sympathy for her inability to sleep when I can barely muster any sort of energy to feel *anything else*.

I suppose I could have kept that to myself though.

“You aren’t serious? I’ve been worried sick about you! *Again*!”

“I’m fine,” I say, because that’s the only thing I can think to settle things down. It doesn’t work, though.

“No, you’re not *fine*, Claire! Look at you! This isn’t fine!”

“Stop yelling.”

My head hasn’t stopped hurting since the chain tried to pull it off my shoulders. Honestly, I think it may have pulled me apart a little inside, done damage that didn’t show up on the outside. I haven’t even gotten the shrill fire alarm out of my ears… it’s ever-present, a low hum or a wailing cry. It interrupts every thought I try to put together.

“No!” Rhea snaps. “I don’t think I will, because I don’t know how else to get it through to you that you fucking matter to me! You keep putting yourself in danger like you don’t have anyone who will suffer for it. It’s like I don’t even matter to you.”

“Of course you matter.” I say, though my tone is the same flat whisper, hardly convincing.

Rhea must agree, because tears well in her eyes. “Stop doing this, Claire! Stop running full speed at brick walls.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means you’re hurting yourself on purpose… making stupid decisions, doing dumb shit that is only going to end up bad for you and all of us!”

“I’m sorry,” I say, blinking. “Are you blaming me for what happened?”

It’s my fault. I know that. It was negligent at best and foolhardy at worst to think that I could trust a stranger, to think that I could find Wes and put an end to Davos. But to hear her put the blame on me? That hurts in a whole new way.

“Yeah, you know what?” She crosses her arms, doubling down on her statement. “Yes, I am. You are only thinking about yourself here!”

“That’s not true.”

“Oh?” She sneers. “Isn’t it? Because if you were thinking about me or even Remy, you never would have abandoned me like that!”

I sigh, trying to ease the pressure in my skull by pressing my fingers over my eyes. It does nothing to alleviate the ache, so I throw my hands to my sides.

“I didn’t abandon you. You were in Florida with your fucktoy, trying to pretend you aren’t pining over your brother’s fucking security guard.” Rhea’s mouth falls open again—I’ve never seen her with her mouth open so often, but I know this isn’t new for her. She’s on Eli’s dick every chance she gets.

At any rate, I'm not done. "And let's not pretend like I left you in some back alley drunk to get your kidney cut out of you. You were perfectly safe."

"Oh, my, God." She says the words slowly, punctuating each one with a shake of her head. "You stupid fucking bitch. You're completely missing the point! You can't just run away from people you care about!"

My face burns at the insult, and rage unlike anything I've ever felt bursts through my veins. And fuck, it feels good. It's a different kind of burn, a fire that warms me from the inside out.

"I'm the stupid bitch?" I laugh. "You're the one picking a fight because you need to sate your victim complex."

The words aren't my own. I don't know where they come from, but they tumble freely from my mouth, and they feel so good.

"Victim complex?" She laughs, incredulous. "You're *not* okay, Claire. I don't know what the fuck he did to you, but you're taking your pain out on the wrong people."

It doesn't feel wrong, but I don't tell her that. I keep my mouth shut as she stares at me, tears welling in her eyes. I saw tears in Remy's eyes yesterday, when I told him I couldn't ever love him, when he told me about his wife, his son…

We've never fought before. Rhea is the one person I could never tire of, and even when we would have a difference of opinion, we never let it turn into anything. Our friendship was unshakeable. But I wasn't… I'm not.

My entire world got shaken as if I just exist in a snow globe, just an inconsequential little figurine in a glass cage that someone could upend on a whim. And now, those old pieces won't just settle back into where they were—they've been rattled too hard, fell down in all the wrong places.

I cross my arms, not dignifying that with a response, and I see the hurt well in her eyes. She turns sharply, like she can't get away from me fast enough. It's when she's already at the door, her hand hovering on the knob, that she glances back at me.

"You never asked why we were in Florida."

I narrow my eyes on her, confused. "You said we needed a vacation—one last gathering."

"Yeah, well that was a cover. I didn't get a chance to give you your birthday present that night." She laughs, taking something from her purse and dropping it on the kitchen counter. "Happy fucking birthday."

She is gone before I can say anything more, and I'm actually a little glad. My throat is throbbing with the effort it took to speak, and even though I picked the fight with her, I don't want it to go any further. Everything that just happened was exhausting, and I have half a mind to just sit still in this chair until sleep comes to claim me.

But curiosity gets the better of me, so I force myself to stand and cross to the kitchen.

A green file folder sits there, with papers peeking out of the covers. A rubber band secures them from falling out, so I slide that off, letting it loop around my wrist as I prop the folder open and get a look at the packet of papers inside.

Warranty deed for acquisition of property.

My eyes dart down to the block of text below, sorting through the legal mumbo jumbo until I see the address. 1432 Marine Way, Miami Florida.

I blink at the papers, not sure what I'm supposed to be seeing, and then flip through them 'til I land on the last page. There are two names listed under the buyers.

Rhea Boudreaux, on the left, and on the right, with an X just waiting for a signature below it… Claire Monroe.

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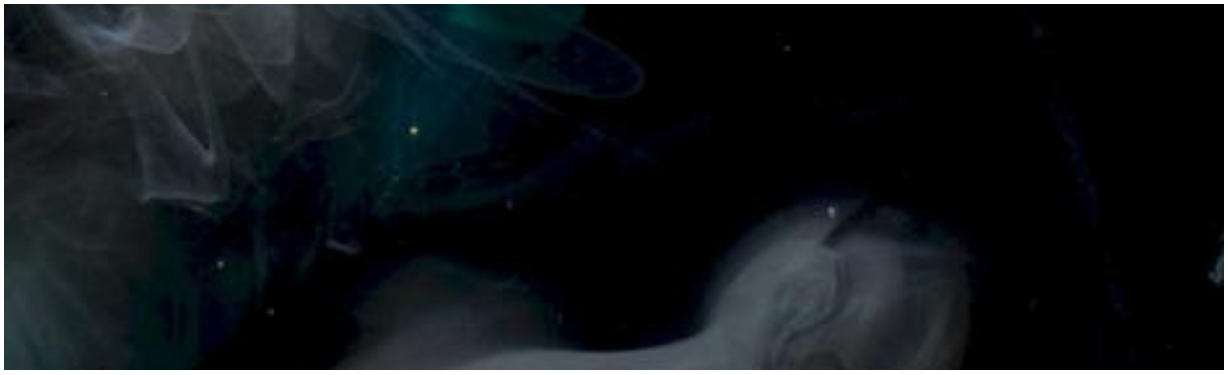

“Remington!” The fast series of raps on the door turns heavy with impatience, and I pull the pillow tight over my face.

Everybody wants something from me right now… everybody except for her.

They all need me to fix things for them, to assure them, to tell them what to do. It’s maddening, especially because my attempts to shut them all out are largely futile, and not for lack of trying. Rhea fucking swindled the receptionist into a copy of the key and burst in here of her own volition.

I gathered from the slammed door across the apartment suite that things didn’t go well when she tried to talk to Claire, and a vicious, pathetic part of me was mildly pleased. I wanted her to be able to pull Claire out of her funk, but a very tiny part of me would have been wounded if Rhea had succeeded where I failed.

That didn’t stop me from having the senator visit, though I forbid him from saying anything to her about her mother or Addie or the fact that he was almost indisputably her father.

No, indisputably now. The results of the second test, the one I personally witnessed the doctor collect his hair for, came back positive. It’s probably why he’s beating down my door right now.

I idly consider the gun on my bedside table. Maybe a warning shot would get it through his thick skull that I don’t fucking care about him right now. But as his speed increases, and I assume he’s taken to beating the door with

both fists, I sit up, throwing the pillow at the door, growling my irritation as I stalk to the door.

His fist nearly knocks right into my face when I rip the door open, and he loses his balance, tumbling toward me. I step aside just enough to let him go careening toward the bed, which catches his shins before he can faceplant on top of it.

Victor spins wildly, looking around for me. When he finds me, I don't know whether to laugh or call the fucking looney bin. His hair is disheveled, and he's wearing the same suit he was wearing when I saw him yesterday. Judging by the way he sways, I'm guessing he's dressed in yesterday's clothes because he went on a binge. And he smells like he slept in an alley.

"Not a good look for you, Senator." I tell him calmly. "You think this is gonna win the people's favor? Really trying to humble yourself by walking around smelling like piss and frying grease."

"F-fuck you." He slurs, pointing at me. "What was I supposed to do? Go home and *fuck* my wife? Knowing what she did?" He laughs a little, though there's obviously nothing funny about his predicament.

"You could have got a room." I suggest. We're in a hotel, after all. "You could have figured out what your play is."

"My play?" He teeters a bit, looking bewildered. "I have no proof. Even with friends in the D.A.'s office, all we have is a th-theory."

"I don't care." I sigh. "Call the police or don't. Go put another fucking kid in her. Tie her to the cross at the local church and let the congregates throw holy water on her. I don't fucking care about any of it… any of you."

His eyes grow wider, the blown pupils taking over the dark blue of his irises. Claire definitely got those eyes from him, no matter what people say about how much she looks like her mother.

"She—she's a killer… or she kept my father's secret at least. What k-" he hiccups, presses the back of his hand to his mouth, and then swallows heavily. "What kind of woman lets a girl be taken like that?"

I only blink at him. He was with me to witness the mistress I killed, to see that women can be just as vile as the rest of us. Instead, I hit him where it hurts. "What kind of woman turns her back on a child being abused when she's responsible for putting her there?"

His brow crinkles a bit, and though he knows what I'm talking about, he doesn't know the full extent. It's not my right to tell him, and really it isn't

his right to know, but I am not protecting his idea of the whore he shares his bed with.

“Claire recognized Addie because she was the person who moved her along from house to house. She posed as a social worker, or if she was one, she did a shit job. The only time Claire saw her was when she was moving her from one place to another… she didn’t show up when the police took her to the station… didn’t ask why a teenager would try to pull a knife on her foster father.”

Victor’s brow scrunches more as his confusion deepens. “She did what?”

“Oh, but she was there when your daughter woke up in the hospital after she tried to kill herself, so kudos, I guess.” I roll my eyes, just in case his drunk brain hasn’t been able to detect the sarcasm.

“She tried to k—” he shakes his head again, abandoning that line of thought. “What happened?”

“Your wife happened. She fucking ruined lives. Now you get to decide what to do about it. Lucky you.”

He’s quiet as he works through something in his mind, though he still sways, unsteady. His eyes fill with tears so fast, it’s almost alarming. “I have a daughter.”

Poor fucker actually has two, but I don’t know if I’ll tell him that anytime soon. I think he took my admission at the hospital as a slip of the tongue, and I’ve not bothered to correct him. Violet is Wes’ problem. I’m done fixing everything for everyone, done trying.

My priority is Claire, whether she recognizes it or not. She’s been locked in her room, and I’ve let her have the space for now. But I won’t wait forever. If this isn’t a fluke, then she’ll be seen by the best therapists I can find. I’ll feed her lithium or antidepressants. I’ll do anything I can to save her, even if she doesn’t want to be saved.

And if I can’t?

Well, she doesn’t have to love me for me to keep her. But it would be a lot better for everyone if she did.

“Yeah, and you’re not going anywhere near her until you get your shit together. So, get your house in order and deal with the bitch, or get out of my way and accept that you’ll never have a relationship with Claire. I won’t allow it.”

Victor stumbles toward me, his eyes wide. He doesn’t just smell of desperation… he looks like it too. “Tell me what to do. I don’t know what

to do.” His voice breaks, turning to a low wail as he buries his face in his hands. I note the spot on his left hand, a pale ring where his wedding band should have been. Seems he’s already made up his mind, to some extent.

“You want to know what I think you should do?”

His emphatic nodding makes my head hurt, and I think he’s about two seconds away from dropping to his knees to beg me for an answer. “You know this stuff. I—I don’t know what to—”

“Gut the bitch.”

Victor’s spine goes straight at my words, or maybe the flat delivery. “Wh-what?”

“I don’t let monsters live, Victor.” I tell him, clapping him heavily on the shoulder. I don’t bother amending myself despite the thought that flashes through my mind that I’m supposed to be done with that. “So, if I were you, I’d take her away to a cabin in the woods for a romantic getaway… reconnect. And then fucking *end* her before she can ruin more lives.” I shrug as I step back, taking in his ghastly white pallor. “But that’s just me.”

“I— I’ve never—”

“You’ve never killed?” I guess. “Well, there’s a first time for everything, right? You’re in it, now, senator. You know the truth about your friends… that place you found Claire, he was a friend right?”

He looks at me with surprise, and I can sense he’s getting ready to ask how I know that. “Claire’s buyer at the auction… Carrington Hardin is the name I found after Dimitri dug around. Only thing is, it was weird. Carrington seemed like a normal guy… quiet. Of course, anyone can put on a façade, but it didn’t make sense to me that a man who lived in a glorified shack would have hundreds of thousands of dollars to spend on a woman he saw once in a sixty second video. Michael did some more digging after we recovered Claire, and I realized Carrington is the receptionist at Evan Ludlow’s office… the same one your wife works at. And he’s gay.”

Victor opens his mouth and closes it, looking something like a fish.

“Your wife didn’t make a one-time decision to help these monsters because she was jealous of your girlfriend. You’re married to a fucking pit viper. You can either chop her head off first or wait and hope the worst she does is strangle you in your sleep.”

I watch the denial, the anger and fear and grief flash all across his face in rapid succession. And then he looks at me, pleading. “Can you do it?”

My first instinct is to laugh, and I do. Here I am, telling myself and everyone else that I'm done dealing with their problems, and yet I haven't chased him off yet. But killing his bitch for him? That's not my prerogative. I'm opening my mouth to tell him as much when a thought occurs to me.

It could be madness or genius. I don't know if it's cruelness or kindness, and I don't know if it will help. But I'm pretty sure it can't hurt.

"You really want her gone?"

"Yes." The senator's voice is a whisper. "I have children… what if she puts them in danger? What if she gives them up to this life? I can't let her get away with this, but without the evidence, I…"

"Okay." I nod.

His relief is half terror as he realizes what he just set into motion. The squeaky-clean senator, who's got a reputation as a family man, just commissioned the murder of his wife.

"I know someone who can help."

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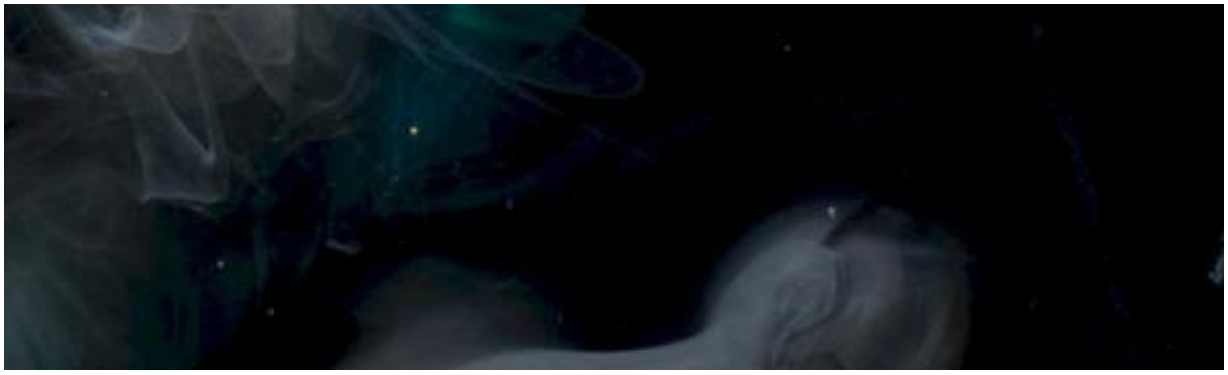

There are so many things in my mind, but they don’t come out right even when I do try to give voice to them. My head is a mess—I still hurt, everywhere. It feels kind of like getting hit by a truck and then dragged very slowly. Some wounds are healing, while others can’t yet get the break they need to get better.

My head is one of them. I need to not feel something.

No, correction. I need to not *think* about everything. I need to learn how to shut my brain off without shutting my body off. Instead, it’s like some sort of reversal… my brain is so overloaded, it’s shut down my body to try and process everything going on inside it.

Everything takes energy I don’t have… it’s why I’m still wearing the tank top and sweatpants I dragged on after the bath with Remy. Brushing my teeth has felt like a herculean task that I’ve skipped more than I ever would have dreamed, but then when I get up to pee and get a look at myself, it does nothing to help the self-hatred I am drowning in.

It’s why I haven’t fought him yet on leaving, on letting me go back to my apartment and be alone. Wherever we are, it’s like the penthouse. He has me under his thumb, and yet he’s on the opposite side of the place, and there are doors between us and so much that hasn’t been said. He’s not leaving me alone, but he hasn’t pestered me, and for that, I’ve been content to not have the conversation I will eventually need to.

He brings me food that I don’t eat, books I stare at without reading, clothes I don’t have the desire to step into. Each time he’s come to me, his

demeanor is patient, kind, gentle. He doesn't make me feel broken because I'm still not feeling anything.

But when he comes into my room this time, his energy is different. There's nothing patient or gentle about the way he throws my door back so hard it has me lifting my face off the pillow and blinking in confusion. He's also dressed to the nines instead of slumming it with me the way he has for the last few days.

"We're going out." He announces, tossing something on the bed. "Come on."

I just watch him, not ready for the fight he seems to be in the mood for. "No."

"It wasn't a question." He tears the blanket off of me and lets it fall to the floor. "Get up."

Maybe if I ignore him, he'll go away.

I close my eyes, and a moment later I feel his hands on my ankles as he tugs me down the bed. "What are you doing?" I accuse, sitting up to try and pull out of his reach.

"I told you; we're going out. If you don't get up, I'll carry you out."

There's no smirk on his lips, no teasing. He just looks at me with his jaw set, his eyes hard. He's annoyed with me, angry, I'm sure that he laid it all out there and I gave him nothing in return. "I don't want to go anywhere."

"Well, too bad this isn't about what you want. You have three seconds to stand, or I'll throw you over my shoulder."

I roll my eyes at him and stand. He's tall enough that I'm only looking at his chest, the white collar of his shirt so pristine. When I flick my gaze up, he's watching me without any discernible emotion. I don't like that.

"Change."

His eyes indicate whatever he threw at me, now lying on the floor in a heap with the blanket I've started to rot into. The black material on the ground is small, and I have no interest in getting dressed up and pretending I'm in one piece when inside, everything feels like it's splintered. "No."

He stoops to pick up the dress, which it turns out, isn't a dress as he hands it to me. It's a shirt, and he's got leggings to go with it too. It's an odd contrast to his attire, and I don't know what to make of that. "If you won't get dressed, I will do it for you. This isn't a choice."

I vaguely remember him telling me I never had to do anything I didn't want to with him and wonder what happened to that guy, but I don't miss

him, and I don’t bring it up. But I do strip off the tank top and let it fall to the ground as I take the shirt he offers. His eyes don’t dip to take in my bare breasts, and when I slip the waistband of the pants down to follow my shirt on the floor, he just continues to stare at my face. A bra and underwear just seemed so unnecessary, and I guess he must have agreed, because he didn’t bring me a set.

I stand completely naked in front of him, and he only holds the new clothes out for me, so I take the pants, step into them, and then tug the top over my head. It takes everything in me not to fall back onto the bed when I get it in place, but I only look at him, awaiting the next command. I’m sure it will be something like go brush your teeth or find a hairbrush, but he doesn’t say any of that. Instead, he points at a pair of sandals on the ground, so I slip my feet into them and then look up to see him watching me.

The stony façade has cracked, his jaw slackened, and I can’t tell what it is, but he doesn’t look quite so annoyed with me. He reaches up a hand that lands on my cheek, the thumb brushing over my skin. I know he’s seeing the bruises, the blood that still hasn’t receded from the broken vessels.

“Come on.” His voice is softer now as he leads me to the elevator.

It’s not a long ride, and when it dings open, the lobby we exit into is quiet, glossy and clean and so bright it makes me want to crawl back into the elevator. Something about it reminds me of the hospital—similar in its cold sterility.

Remy pulls me swiftly through the space, not the least bit bothered to be seen with me looking like I just crawled out of bed… because I did.

And yet, I’m surprised when the glass door opens before me, and we enter out into a balmy night. It’s late, but judging by the blue in the black sky, it’s not too late. I guess that means he’s not dragging me out for dinner or anything stupid like that.

When we get to the shiny black car waiting for us, he opens my door for me, and gestures for me to get in. When I do, he reaches in, buckling my seatbelt for me. I’m vaguely aware of the fact that I probably smell—it’s been days since I’ve felt human, let alone tried to look like it. But if I do, he doesn’t let on, because as he retreats across me, his eyes find mine.

Something rises in me. It’s just a fluttering, really, but it takes me by surprise enough that my lips fall open. Remy’s hand snakes around the back of my head, and for a moment I think he means to kiss me. And he does, sort of, pressing his mouth to my forehead and breathing me in.

I sit, frozen, as his skin warms mine.

He doesn’t look at me as he pulls back, doesn’t say anything. He just shuts the door and walks around to the driver’s side.

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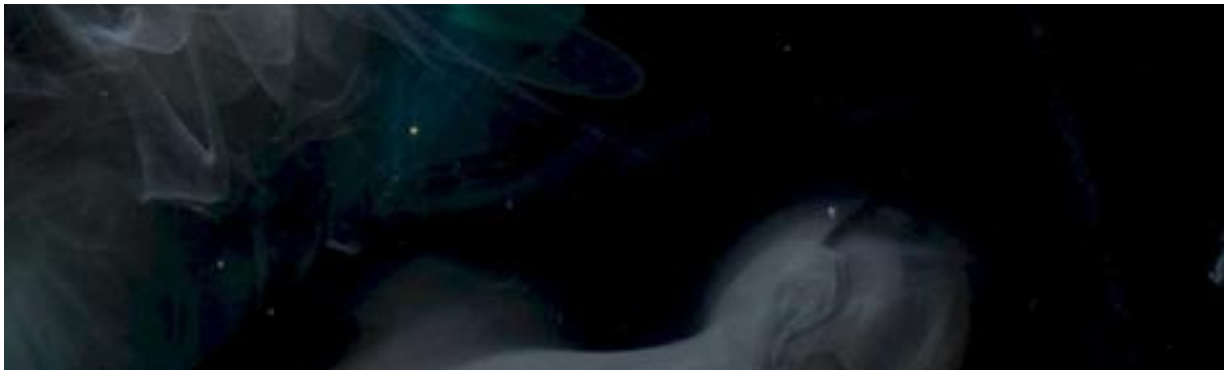

Claire is quiet the whole way, looking wordlessly out the window.

Getting her here wasn't without effort. I don't know how the rest of the night will go. She's in no headspace to entertain me, much less when I can't tell her where we're going. I hope she's not expecting much, though I doubt she's got any illusions about grandeur given that I gave her loungewear to change into. In truth, it doesn't matter what she wears tonight. The all-black ensemble will just hide the blood better than the white cotton top I've been dying to pull over her head all week.

This could be a very bad idea, but I don't have a better suggestion, so I finally pull off the highway, feeling the crunch of the tires on the gravel. She doesn't turn to look at me, doesn't ask any questions. I'd be proud that she isn't nervous, that she trusts me enough to let me lead her anywhere, but I'm too rattled that she still isn't feeling anything. She can't stave it all off forever, and once she lets it all in, it's gonna hurt like hell.

"Almost there." I tell her, glancing down the path ahead of me. The headlights only illuminate so much, and the tall swaying grasses on either side of the path block out everything in the periphery. For now, it's just us, but once we get to the house…

The black SUV is pulled up right to the decrepit front porch, and it's the only thing in sight that looks like it's not from a horror movie. The tire swing hanging from a fraying rope in the tree certainly gives me reason to park on the other side of the yard, and of course, it looks like it's moving, if only a little despite the lack of a breeze.

When I cut the engine, she finally turns to me, but it's not with questions in her eyes. She's awaiting a command, an explanation. I don't offer her anything yet as I climb out, leaving the keys on the dashboard, and come around to open her door. She takes the hand I offer and lets me pull her from the car. I can see a little bit of interest as her eyes glance over the SUV.

We're at the door before I hear the crunch of gravel alerting me that the last of our guests is arriving, but I don't want to spoil the surprise, so I open the door and usher her inside with a hand on the small of her back. Her eyes sweep every inch of the place as we step inside, the musty smell a little better since Dimitri left the windows open earlier.

"Where are we?" she finally asks, noticing the dust collected on the staircase banister just before her. The obvious signs of abandonment only grow as I lead her into the kitchen, where the few cabinet doors that still remain are all propped open, showcasing the empty shelves. The only light we have is what comes in from the full moon shining through the open windows, and I'm glad it at least obscures the rats and insects that are hiding somewhere in here.

"This house has been abandoned for nearly forty years." I tell her idly. "I didn't choose it, but it will work nicely enough for our purposes." Our eyes connect for a minute, but she doesn't ask me what our purposes are. "When we were apart, I did a little bit of reconnaissance. I met a lot of people, learned a lot of things…"

The glow of the lamp ahead defines the path forward, and still, she doesn't look afraid, willing to let me lead her into a situation where anyone and anything could be waiting for us.

But she's not in danger. She *is* the danger.

"Remember when I told you some people don't deserve to live?"

Claire doesn't look to me this time when she answers in a whisper, *yes*.

"Well, here's another."

She doesn't question me as we take the last few steps together, pressed side by side in the narrow corridor.

When the hall opens up into the living room, lit by large work lamps in every corner, she gasps. And finally, I see it.

Shock. The first true emotion I've seen on her since… well, since I watched her leave me.

The shock doesn’t last long, because it turns quickly to confusion as she looks from the woman in a heap on the ground, to the senator standing above his wife, a bloody knife in hand.

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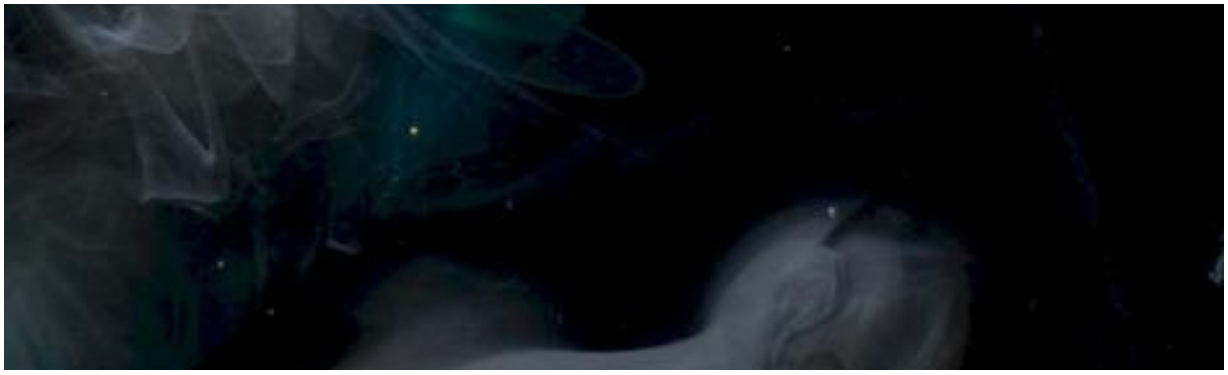

“What the hell?” Remy snaps, taking an angry step toward the senator. “What did you do?”

“She’s alive.” Victor assures him, his knuckles white around the blade wrapped tightly in his hand. “I just… I had to do it at least once.”

“She doesn’t look alive.” I say, glancing up at him and then back to the body of the woman who helped me find my freedom once.

“I knocked her out. She wouldn’t stop screaming. I…”

“Well, yeah,” Remy says, “You stabbed her. What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. I just… I got so mad. I—”

“What is going on?” I ask.

Some part of me is telling me that I should have never walked into this situation, that something is wrong. And yet I can’t make myself feel worried — If not for the numbness, because it doesn’t make sense that they would hurt me. The senator pulled me out of the fire, and Remy… he hasn’t spent the last six months paying Moose a small fortune to keep me alive so that he could kill me himself.

Remy appraises me, and I don’t know what he’s looking for, but he must find it because he nods. “Wake her up.”

Victor drops down to rouse his wife, but Remy wraps an arm around me, turning me in the opposite direction. That’s when I see the table set up, all the instruments placed atop it. It unlocks a memory somewhere…

The first time Remy brought me to his basement, when he had Eric Giante tied to his chair.

When I glance at him, he's looking down at me, thoughtful. "The day I had you on my boat for the first time, you mentioned your social worker… how she was the only constant you ever knew… how she handled your admission to Darrington."

"Yes," I say, because he almost seems to be looking for confirmation.

"That was by design. Addison, over there?" He nods his head behind me, where I hear Addie moan as the senator hauls her up. "She's the one who put you into the system."

I stare at him, not sure where he's going with this, or why I'm here. "Of course she did." I say, glancing out of the corner of my eye to see the senator dragging her to her feet by a handful of her scarlet hair. "That's her job."

"No, it's actually not. Addison Massarini? She's the wife of Senator Victor Massarini… your father."

I'm not sure what sort of reaction he expects at that information, but I have nothing to give him. No shock, no confusion, no amusement. I just stare at him. "No…" I take them in—Victor with his large hand clamped over Addie's mouth… the wedding band noticeably absent.

Her eyes are wide, but she doesn't have the power to fight against him, particularly since she's tied up with enough rope to hang the whole town. She looks like the hero from a cheesy silent film when the victim ties them to the train tracks.

"He is. He suspected as much the first time he met you. He stole your toothbrush to run a DNA test, but the results weren't a match."

Victor is watching me, his lip between his teeth. He looks completely different from the first time I met him at Remy's house in Costa Rica, and different from when he sat next to me on the plane. Then, he'd been composed, perfectly polished and put together just the way you'd expect a man who works for the government. Last time, I hadn't exactly focused on what he looked like, but in hindsight, I realize it was more like this than not.

Anxious.

"But that didn't sit right with either of us," Remy explains, "so we tested again. This time, we did it without telling his wife. And wouldn't you know?" He hands his phone out to me in his large palm. I hesitate just a moment before accepting it to look down at whatever he's showing me.

There are a bunch of words that look like a foreign language for all the sense they make, but one thing stands out among the rest.

Probability of paternity: 99.9998%

It takes my brain a long moment to work out what exactly that's saying… too long. When I look back up at Remy, he nods. "Claire, meet your father."

There are too many questions I can't even begin to entertain, so I push them out of my head, staring at the man who is my alleged father… or rather, the man who fucked my mother. I don't see any similarities—he's tall with naturally tanned skin and a straight nose that's clearly never felt the impact of a pissed off woman.

"Claire." Victor smiles, though I see that his lips twitch on the way. The man looks like he's about to faint at any second.

I turn to Addie, whose wide eyes are pleading for me to help her. She's a severe woman—beautiful in all the right ways, but she never radiated warmth. She wasn't ever there for me; she was just *there*.

"I think we should let Addison explain." Remy says, nodding at Victor who removes his hand from his wife's face, letting her gasp ring through the stale room.

"Help me!" She pleads. "They're crazy! They're making this shit up! Let me go!"

I'm not sure what it says about me that I was more willing to believe a sadist who chained me up in his basement was my father than I am to believe Senator Massarini is, but I guess that was the wrong question the whole time.

I shattered when Evan Ludlow had told me in the same breath that he could be my father, and that that wouldn't stop him from doing whatever he wanted with me. It's a depravity I've never let myself think of; a horror unlike anything I could fathom. I've long ago accepted that some people will do whatever they have to for the sake of power and pleasure, taking it wherever they find it. But his willingness to take things that far had been too much.

Hearing that Victor could be my father—that he *is*—should be a relief. Instead, it just leaves me with more pain. Does that make Addison my mother? Did she get rid of me twenty-one years ago and then keep an eye on me from afar because she didn't want a child?

I remember some mention of the senator's wife and children. I wasn't listening entirely, but wasn't she pregnant at the wake?

"Explain." I tell her, because it's all I can manage. My throat doesn't ache as bad anymore, but my chest does, and it's taking up too much presence to

force more air into my lungs.

“I don’t know what they’re talking about!” She cries, jerking in an attempt to get away from where the senator is holding her still against him. Blood seeps out onto the rope that’s wound around her black pantsuit, and while it looks like a fair amount, I gather the wound isn’t terribly serious.

“You know exactly what we’re talking about. Tell Claire all about how you cut her from her mother’s womb and left her to die. Tell Victor how you helped orchestrate his girlfriend’s kidnapping, her murder, and the sale of their children.”

Victor’s lips are trembling, and I can’t tell if he’s holding back a sob or a snarl. He looks feral in the worst way, and I’m glad he dropped the knife, because I recognize the look of a man with nothing to lose.

But my brain, fragmented as it is, grazes over the horrific crimes Remy just claimed her to be responsible for, latching onto one word.

Children.

Part of me thinks maybe Addie is right, that the two of them are sharing a state of psychosis right now. Folie a deux is a real phenomenon, after all.

But then I remember that I’m probably the most fucked up person in the room…

That is, until *they* walk in.

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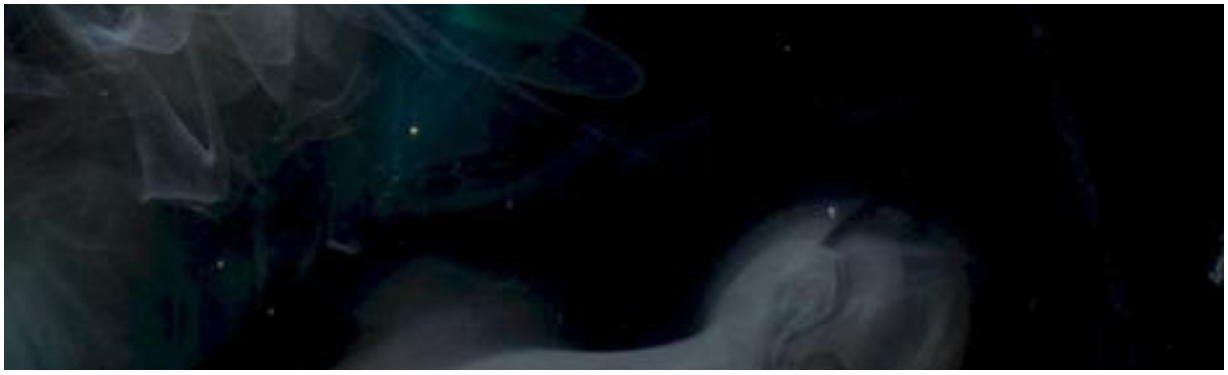

I don’t know if it’s genius or madness that I brought Wes here with Violet, but I suppose it’s all the same in the end. There’s too much riding on tonight, too many threads that need tied together. The only way I can see for Claire to heal is to know what she needs to heal from… and maybe to take justice into her own hands.

I don’t know how to delicately tell someone that they have an identical twin that they’ve never known about, any more than I know how to tell a man that he doesn’t just have one daughter that was stolen from him. But maybe I should have tried to give them some kind of preparation—Victor looks like he may keel over when he turns to take in the new arrivals. I don’t care about him right now, though.

My focus is on Claire, who stands stock still, like she’s afraid to breathe.

Wrapping an arm around her, I guide her a step forward, to where Wes is standing with his wife. Oddly enough, he looks nervous. I’d laugh if I wasn’t so worried about Claire, whose lips move without forming words.

“This is her?” Violet asks, dubious. As if they aren’t the spitting fucking image of one another.

“Claire,” I tuck a stray lock of her hair behind her ear, keeping my voice soothing. “Meet your sister. Violet.”

A moment passes before anyone breaks the silence, which is thick and tense. “Sister?” The senator sputters, coming around to take them both in as they take in one another.

“Twins.” Wes confirms, though he doesn’t look to Victor until he asks, “Those run in your family, don’t they, senator?”

Claire and Violet appraise one another without speaking, and I don’t know if it’s shock or resentment or just fear that keeps them from reacting to one another.

“Yes.” Victor whispers slowly, trying to grapple with that information. “But not… *identical*…”

A sob rips through the musty air, and Claire’s eyes turn to the senator. But he’s already turning his back to her, striding toward his wife, who sits motionless in the chair he left her in, her useless attempts at escape having been quelled. Maybe seeing them together gives her a moment of remorse —ripping a baby from a woman’s womb and killing her is awful, but then to separate the babies on top of it? It’s unnecessarily cruel.

“You vicious bitch!”

For one second, I think Victor is going to strike his wife across the face. Instead, he stops just before her and spits in her face. “You fucking vile pig!”

Addison’s shoulders straighten as she struggles to keep her head up from where it’s falling forward. I can see her eyes rolling already. It’s too soon for that, so I turn to find the bottle of epinephrine, while Victor continues to scream at her, agonized cries tearing his words to shreds.

It’s been twenty-one years, and yet I’d wager that he never moved on from his first love. That, or he just never realized he was married to a monster.

Addison’s eyes are unfocused as I draw closer to her. No one seems to see me coming, and nobody cares enough to stop me when they do. I stab her none too delicately with the needle right over where her heart should be, despite not being convinced she has one, and ignore her gasping, shuddering breaths as the drug works its way through her system rapidly.

I drop before her just long enough to look into her cold eyes. “Tell them what you did, Addison. Tell them how you betrayed their mother… them.” I get a handful of her hair and yank her head back, giving her no choice but to look at Claire and Violet. Black streaks from her makeup run down her neck, but I know she’s not crying with regret. I see her throat working to swallow her anger and agony. She starts to shake her head, but her hair is still tangled in my fingers, so I give her a sharp tug to set her straight.

“Please!” She sobs. “You’re going to kill me!”

“Not me.” I tell her softly. “See, I’m a man of taste. Art, poetry, music. I appreciate symmetry… you understand, right? You’re a woman of taste, too, aren’t you, Addie? That’s why you aligned yourself with people who could get you the furthest from your past.”

Fresh tears roll down her face, but they do little to win her favor with any one of us. “Please…”

“Please what? Please don’t tell them that you grew up here? You’re so ashamed of your childhood, Addison, when it’s your adult life you should be ashamed of. What kind of woman has another sold off to a pack of wolves in Gucci? Or was it the Armani that you did it for?”

“No!” She pleads, snot dripping down her face.

I never particularly enjoyed ruining a woman’s makeup, but this is a definite improvement for her.

“If you don’t want to use your tongue, we can cut it out.” I let go of her all at once, her head falling forward before she catches herself. “You won’t be needing it anyway.”

I’m already lifting the serrated blade, admiring the wicked teeth, by the time she screams, “Okay! Okay! Stop! I’ll tell them!”

It takes another moment, and a flash of the blade, before she takes a shaky breath. “I helped Senator Massarini get rid of her!” Her desperate eyes shoot to me, seeking praise or maybe just confirmation that I haven’t moved any closer with the knife.

“My *father*?” Victor’s voice is cold and shaky, his disbelief thinly veiled. “No, he… he wouldn’t.”

“Your father was a fucking menace!” Addison spits, blood flying from her lips. “He didn’t want you saddled to that bitch for the rest of your life because of some stupid fucking mistake. You’d already gone back to wherever the fuck you were, and he found out she was pregnant. She was stupid enough to take the test at your house and one of the housemaids found it. They thought it was your sister’s, but your father knew better because he knew your sister was into girls. It was early, so he tried to pay her to terminate, but Lauren wouldn’t do it. She wouldn’t, so we had to get rid of her. I helped him, and in exchange, he helped me win Victor’s favor.”

“You…” Victor’s laugh is unhinged. “You *helped* him?”

“It’s easy to erase people when you hold their records. The world forgot about Lauren, and we moved on.”

“You’re just going to gloss over the details?” I snort.

Maybe the details are too gritty for the delicate company I've gathered, but I'm not going to stand by and let her act as though she was little more than a spectator.

"Do they matter?" Addison growls, glancing up at me with violence in her eyes. She doesn't have to tell me what she did to Claire's mother, because that look tells me without words just what vicious things she is capable of.

"It's your last chance to confess your sins." I tell her calmly. "Maybe you don't believe in a higher power, but you must know the devil is real. You've aligned yourself with him for years, but do you think he'll have pity on your soul because you're one of his?" I laugh as I watch the panic play on her face. She clearly believes *something* comes after this, and that's enough to make her comply.

"My mother owned horses." She says suddenly. "Before she withered away, she used to show them. Every time her daddy hurt her, he'd buy her a new pony. But she wasn't capable of caring for anything, so they'd die out there and he'd hurt her again, and she'd get another just to watch it slowly die. You know how you break a wild horse?"

"Snap its neck?" Wes suggests, crossing his arms. He looks bored, but I don't miss the way he keeps glancing out of the corner of his eye at his wife, or the way his jaw is tight like he's working hard to keep his anger in.

"You exhaust it." Addison explains. "That's what we did to Lauren. We had to take her down a peg, show her that it was useless to fight. So, we exhausted her… I mean, *I* was exhausted just watching. I thought for sure one of the men that night would fuck the little bastard out of her. As much as she bled, I thought they did."

There's a moment of awful silence that wants to smother every last one of us. A glance at Claire assures me she's watching, listening to Addison's every word, processing.

"You're a monster." Violet says quietly. "An absolutely despicable monster."

"It was a shock to us all when months later she started to swell." Addison shakes her head. "And an even bigger shock when we found out she wasn't just carrying one little parasite, but two. Victor hadn't come back from deployment yet, so when I got a call asking me to deal with it, I was happy to oblige. People are so very desperate for babies… so desperate that they'll pay any price. And they did." She laughs to herself, and then winces at the

pain it must cause her. She's given up on pleading for mercy, too fond of her vile memories to feign innocence anymore. "But twins attract attention. I couldn't let anyone take them both, and then I had the realization that instead of making money off of them just once, why not do it over and over?"

I want so badly to pull Claire into my arms and hold her, to offer her warmth or comfort. But I don't move, letting her take all of it in stride.

"What did you do?"

"I put the other girl into a system so broken no one would notice a whole child falling through the cracks." Addison says, her voice and eyes distant for a moment before they lock onto Claire. "Except, instead of paying the families to care for her, I charged them. Adoption is expensive, you know, and I can't help that it fails sometimes. It was nice, at first, making all that cash off of her. It was easy, too, until they would start asking questions and then I had to get involved, find another family who would play ball. It became exhausting, so I dropped her eventually with someone who wouldn't ask questions…"

Addison doesn't have to say the name. I know the sort of man who wouldn't ask questions… the sort of man who would violate a child's innocence. He's dead, and soon, Addison will be too.

"You left my sister with someone you *knew* would hurt her." Violet accuses, drawing the attention of everyone. "You left a child with a *predator*. I want to hear you say it. Quit skirting the truth and say that you murdered our mother and then stood by to watch one of her daughter's suffer." Violet says, stepping away from Wes' side. He lets her go without a struggle, rolling his shoulders as he watches her slowly approach her mother's murderer… or one of them, anyway.

"I didn't watch." Addison blinks, turning to look at her as though just realizing she's there. "I looked the other way." Her eyes flit over Violet's shoulder, to where Claire stands stoically, watching what is transpiring without any recognizable emotion on her face. When she looks back to Violet, recognition seems to switch somewhere. "You're the *chosen* one. The one that a wealthy family paid a small fortune for. But I'm guessing your life wasn't rainbows and butterflies, was it, princess?"

Addison's cold laugh turns into the sound of her choking on the blood in the back of her throat. I wonder idly how deeply the senator stabbed her, and if he knew where to place it to make this slow. When Violet doesn't

answer, Addison graces us with a bloody smile. “You were in the Doll House.”

It’s not a question, and Violet doesn’t acknowledge it, but I notice Addison’s eyes lingering on her scars. “Shame. You’d be so beautiful…” Her eyes flit to Claire. “So beautiful that everyone wants you. A docile child with big blue eyes and porcelain skin?” She sneers. “Every foster family’s dream, it seems. You know how much I regret keeping you alive? I helped you get away from the Giante’s and claim your freedom, but you couldn’t just fucking let it go, could you?”

Claire only stares mutely at her, bolstering Addison’s confidence. “I should have smothered you in your mother’s shredded womb, you *wretched little bitch*.”

I’m upon her before I even have a chance to think about it, but a tiny blonde wedges herself between Addison and I before I can dig the blade into her.

“Let me.” Violet says, craning her neck to appeal to me. “Please.”

I gathered the girls for vengeance and justice. Far be it from me to stop her now. I pass the hilt of the blade into her upturned palm, unnerved by the deep color of her irises… or maybe not the color. Maybe it’s how quickly she can go from dead eyes to ones full of feeling.

It slips away as she turns back to face Addison, running a finger over the edge of the knife… hard enough that she draws her own blood. Violet doesn’t even seem to notice, or maybe she just doesn’t care. “You’re right. My life wasn’t rainbows and unicorns. I mean, it *was*, actually… up until my parents died. And then it was more like monsoons and anacondas. You’ve been to the Doll House?”

Addison’s jaw is clamped too tight to make speaking possible as she stares hatefully at the child she sold off. “No.” Violet answers for her. “You wouldn’t have walked out if you went in… at least not looking like that.”

Quick as a whip, she drives the blade into Addison’s thigh, causing her to open her mouth to let out a guttural scream, which fractures into a sobbing plea.

“Stop!” Her eyes traipse over us all in turn, but slowly, she realizes she will get no mercy from any of us. “Please! I have children! My boys! Mas—”

“Don’t you *fucking* dare!” Victor’s scream cuts her off abruptly. “Don’t you fucking *dare* say their names.” His tone is more controlled when he

speaks again, but the hiss is impossible to ignore when he says, “You won’t hurt my children anymore. Ever.”

The blood dripping onto the floor is thick, being pumped directly from her wicked heart into the gash in her leg. She’ll hemorrhage soon, but I’m not going to force Claire to take the bait. If she wants vengeance, she can have it, but she has to reach for it… anything to show me that she is in there.

“P-please.” Her fluttering eyes turn to Wes, thinking she may find some compassion in the only person who hasn’t taken her indiscretions personally. But if she thinks Wes will grant her mercy, she’s even dumber than I thought.

Or maybe she’s just desperate.

“Well, if I pull the knife out now, you’re going to bleed to death so much faster.” Violet scoffs. “Can’t have that, can we?” She spins, her long hair whipping as she practically skips to the table. “It’s like a buffet!” She says, clapping her hands in excitement as her eyes traipse the weapons laid out before her. “I’d like to try a little of everything, but…”

Her fingers close around a scalpel, and she lets out a squeal as she hurries back to Addison. “Look what I found! Don’t worry—I’ll make your face pretty even though your soul is putrid.”

The sickly sweet voice drops at the end of her promise, and then she grips Addison’s hair in one fist, using the scalpel to draw a line across her cheek. Addison’s scream is weak, and the blood that wells on her pale skin doesn’t flow as fast as it should. “Be grateful for this, Addison. In the Doll House, it’s the sign of a fighter. The smile…” She rips the blade downward to the corner of Addison’s mouth, pulling with more force than she needs. “The smile is what they give you the first time they feel teeth… that’s if you get to keep your teeth. Not everyone does.”

My stomach twists at the thought of Violet enduring something so cruel, but then it doesn’t surprise me. What *does* surprise me is the way she is carving Addison’s face like a turkey without the slightest hint of remorse.

Honestly, Violet terrifies me. But then, so does Claire right now. “It’s called a Glasgow smile. It used to be a gang thing.” She shrugs, pausing to admire her handiwork as she tilts Addison’s chin side to side, inspecting her under the light.

I’ll never forget doing the same to her, in that horrific moment where I’d thought she was Claire. We all have scars, but not all of us wear them on

our face… or even on the outside.

“But the X,” she continues, tracing the letter at the top of the cheekbone. “That’s a tally. One line for every month you’re there. When you wake up, you’ll want to know how long you were unconscious. They’re badges of honor, proving how resilient you are.”

I’m not convinced Addsion is even still alive to hear this story until I hear her gasp, struggling to get a breath. “But for you, I’ll give you three. You don’t deserve them, honestly, but you seem so proud. This one on the right side…” She runs her own finger along Addison’s paper-white cheek, the side with a single slash across her bone. Her own blood mingles with the little bit that drips from the open wound. “That’s for me. But this X?” She draws the X in question as she moves to the other side, using the scalpel with less force this time. “Two lines… one for my mother, and one for my sister.”

When she stands up to step back and admire her masterpiece, Addison’s head falls forward. For one moment, I think she’s gone.

And then out of the corner of my eye, I see Claire moving forward.

Watching the two of them side-by-side is weird, to say the least. Their backs are to Wes and I, and Victor has just pulled himself to his feet from where he was in the corner vomiting his stomach contents since Violet’s first stab. Claire doesn’t look at her sister as she holds her hand out for the scalpel, which is hanging loosely between Violet’s bloody fingers.

I move slowly, rotating myself to get a look at Claire’s face, to see if there’s any emotion there as she takes the medical blade. But she doesn’t so much as blink as she gets a grip on it, lifts Addison’s head by the hair, and draws the blade across her exposed throat.

It’s effortless, beautiful in a macabre way. Most of the blood has already drained from Addison’s head, but whatever was left falls to the ground at the girls’ feet, pulled down by gravity now that her heart has definitely stopped beating. The bit that splashes up onto my face is already cold… but maybe that’s just because she was a cold-blooded snake to begin with.

Claire hands the blade back to Violet without a single word, and when her eyes lock with mine, none are necessary.

“Let’s get you home.”

“Wait!” Victor moves so fast toward us, that finally I see the first signs of something from Claire as she cringes away from him. It emboldens me to wrap an arm around her, and she doesn’t fight it. “Claire…”

I’m not sure what Victor thinks he can possibly say that would have any meaning at all right now, and apparently, neither is he.

“Not now,” I tell him with a curt shake of my head.

I understand his desire to build a bridge… but right now, we’re not building them.

We’re burning them.

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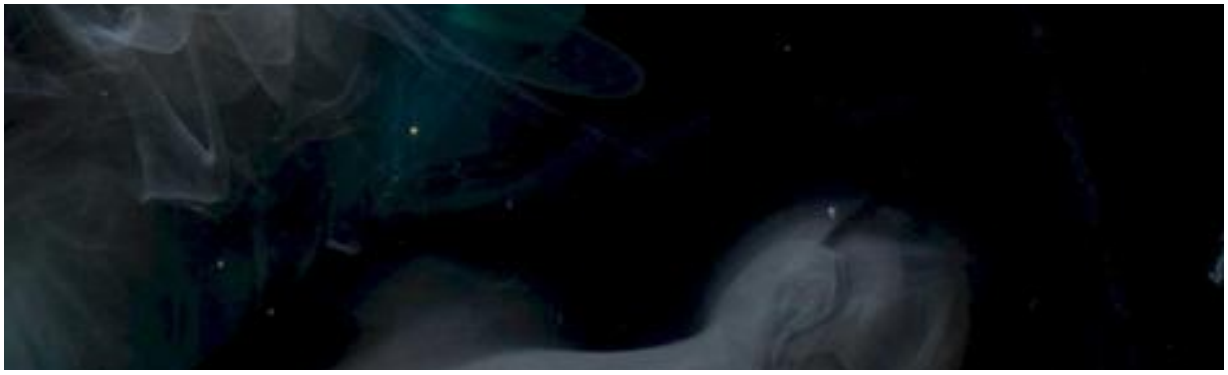

We strip down on the porch, shedding our murder clothes.

It’s significantly less messy than the last time we killed someone together—and the last time I killed someone on my own. I don’t think changing was even really necessary, but we are back in the states, so whatever deal Remy had with Costa Rican authorities to look the other way doesn’t apply here. The senator’s wife isn’t exactly a nobody. Surely, someone will notice she’s gone, and they’ll ask questions. How will they dispose of the body?

Remy handed me a change of clothes before I’d undressed—it’s an exact match to what I just peeled off.

“So the security footage at the hotel doesn’t register an outfit change.” He explains, glancing up at me as he tugs his own pants up his hips. His stomach is bare and hard sculpted, the muscles under his smooth skin taut. Whatever he’s been doing in the months since I left him, it suits him.

Somehow, he’s gotten more attractive. I recognize his beauty—the exquisite shape of him, the cut of his jaw, the curve of his lips. He’s a work of art, but the draw that I used to feel for him, for Rhea, for life in general? It’s just… gone.

Everything is gone, and it should terrify me, but that’s gone too.

Remy watches my face like he’s trying to figure out what’s going on in my head, and then his eyes dip to take me in. For a moment, I’d forgotten where we were, what I was doing. And then I watch him pry his eyes from me to glance behind him at the door to the house, where the senator, Wes, and my sister are still inside.

He approaches me slowly, looking like he's fighting to keep from saying something, and I don't move as he does. I just let him come to me, watch him cross the porch as the wind shakes the trees in the distance. But the air between us is static, warm and calm as he steps against me, his body aligning with mine. He tilts his head down at the same time he grabs my chin gently between his fingers and tips my head back.

I expect that when his lips land on mine, it will be passionate and electric, that his kiss will be desperate, that he'll try to devour me. I expect he'll try to awaken me with all our old tricks.

Instead, he brushes his mouth gently over mine, his soft lips placing a pillowy kiss on my own, parting them for him. His tongue slides against mine, almost experimentally, and an unexpected shiver breaks over me. That doesn't seem to have any effect upon him, though, because he doesn't stop or speed up… he takes his time tasting me, savoring me, and when his tongue slips from mine, his lips work against mine for a minute. Slow, steady, sweet.

Maybe for the first time, there's no need, no urgency or lust in our kiss. And I say our kiss, because after he retreats, I don't let go. I kiss him back, not ready to let go of the warmth he's given me, the fluttering of something deep in my stomach, gentle and timid, but there all the same.

Remy is the one who breaks the kiss. His lips part from mine but with his forehead pressed against mine, we still share the same air, his warm breath ghosting on my wet lips.

Neither of us pull apart.

It's just him and I, two broken people in a perfect moment.

The silence on the way home is peaceful, soothing my soul. Some of the weight of the last few days falls away, little by little.

When we get back to the hotel, he leads me to our suite with an arm around my shoulder all the way to the elevator. Once there, he lets go.

His knuckles brush against mine just lightly enough to be by mistake, but when I glance at him, he's watching me closely enough that I think maybe it *was* intentional. I let the back of my hand touch his, focusing on the simple sensation of this single point of contact.

When we get to the penthouse, he goes straight to the bathroom. I hear the shower begin running, rainfall on the cold tile, and then he pokes his head out from around the door frame and presents me an empty hand, outstretched, and upturned.

My feet move me toward him without thinking about it, and I place my hand in his the same way, letting his fingers close around mine to pull me after him. He's still fully clothed, though his shoes are haphazardly dropped outside the shower stall. I step out of my own as he pulls me to him, with him, toward the shower.

And when he steps under the spray without letting go of my hand or stripping off his clothes, I make the choice to follow him in.

The water is warm as it falls upon us—not hot, not cold. It's comfortable, peaceful, perfect. Remy uses my hand in his to pull me under the spray with him, guiding me to step right up against him.

The shower soaks his shirt, making it cling to him like a second skin, but he seems unbothered about anything in the moment. I feel my hair plastering itself against my skin, and the water sculpting my shirt to me, but it's oddly comfortable.

I rest my head against his chest without thinking about it, letting the rain fall on my face until my eyes have to close so that I can stay there, unmoving. And Remy does the same.

I don't know how long we stay there together, fully clothed in the shower, but I'm not ready for it to be over when he runs his fingers along my spine. I separate myself from him just enough to open my eyes and find him watching me, so I step slightly away from him to let him go if he wants.

But he doesn't go. He sinks down to the floor of the shower, his back against the wall and his hand still holding mine. He doesn't have to tug me down with him or make any kind of offer for me to join him. The look in his eye says enough… he wants whatever I will give him, but he wants me to give it to him.

So, I do, sinking down onto his lap and curling against him again.

We relax like that for a while more. I'm so near sleep that by the time he speaks, I can't be sure whether it's real or a dream. The words are a whisper, but a beautiful one.

"We can sit together in the storm or in the calm, in the dark or in the light…" I'm vaguely aware of his hand smoothing over my head, stroking water from my hair even as more cascades over us. "I'll follow you anywhere, Claire. Everywhere. But I won't leave you alone in the dark."

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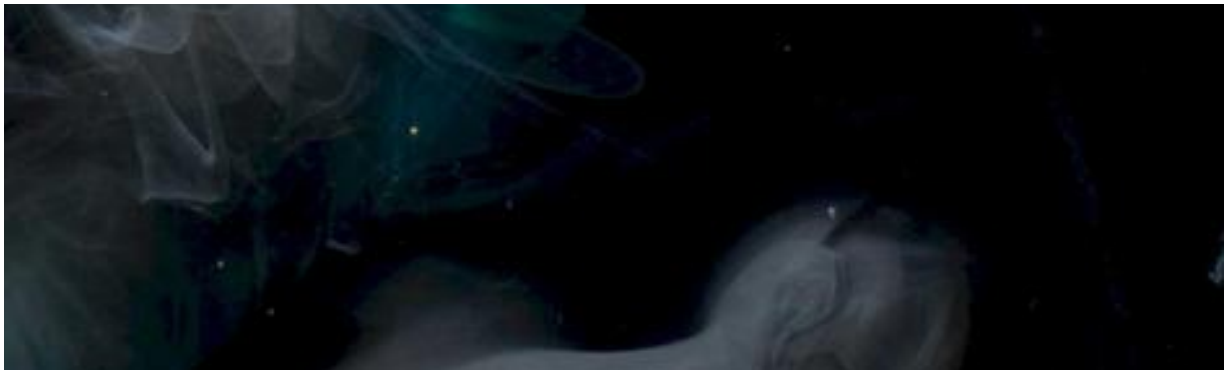

I can’t say whether it was the murder I watched her commit, or the shower that helped. Or maybe it was just sharing the silence with her. I don’t know what it was, but I’ll do it again and again if I have to, draw her out of that beautiful prison that is her own mind time after time if that’s what it takes to catch glimpses of the woman that I fell in love with. I’d stay forever in this little corner of our world, my patience renewed by her progress.

Unfortunately, the constant stream of unsolicited visitors destroys any chance of that possibility.

First, it’s Victor who shows up on our doorstep, desperate to speak to Claire. He’s clearly spiraling, not just because he looks like shit, but because we agreed that he needed to be careful about where he went. Just because you don’t see someone watching you, doesn’t mean they aren’t. I wrestled him out the door and after he fell apart in the hall, curled himself into a ball, and then pulled himself together, he finally left.

Then it’s Violet, who doesn’t put up much of a fight when I tell her that Claire isn’t ready to talk to her. She took it in stride, but then showed up next with Wes, as if that was going to appeal to Claire or me. If Wes told Violet about our relationship, I’m guessing he left out the finer details, like how he let her sister be tied up and accosted in a dirty warehouse.

Once I got them to leave, it was *my* sister who showed up.

Rhea is the only one who I let in, and the only one who didn’t ask to see Claire. But I guess she must have heard her voice, because Claire comes out

of her room and sinks into the chair, waiting to hear whatever Rhea has to say.

I overheard their last conversation, know what it devolved to, know that they haven't spoken to one another in days… the longest they've gone without talking since they met. I think they each owe the other an apology, but for now, at least, I won't insert myself into their dynamic.

"I'm going home." Rhea explains, tugging at her bottom lip thoughtfully. "I… mean, back to school. I have finals and my degree…"

Claire nods. "Of course."

I can tell that wasn't the response my sister expected by the way she hesitates, her eyes flickering briefly to mine. "Are you… coming? Or…?"

"No." Claire doesn't have to consider it, which makes me wonder if she's thought about this already. "I can't, yet." I watch her throat work to swallow, the pattern of the chain marks finally fading into a sallow yellow around the edges.

"Okay." Rhea nods her understanding, and for a moment, the air feels heavy with all the things that none of us are saying. "Do you—do you want me to talk to your professors about a hiatus? Should I send your books or anything?"

"No," Claire assures her. "I'll get in touch with them and figure it out."

This is the most I've heard her speak since she called me to prove the point that I don't own her, and she can sleep with whoever she wants. That point no longer stands. I tried to deny that I cared, but I can't deny that she owns me… maybe even more than I own her.

"Okay…" Rhea hesitates, and then her eyes turn to me. "Eli and Dimitri…"

"I know." I assure her. "Dimitri will accompany you for the rest of the semester."

"Thank you." She breathes a sigh of relief, and I note the curiosity on Claire's face. It's a story for another time, though.

"He's valuable to me, Rhea." I tell her honestly. "But you matter more. Please, treat him well."

"Of course." She smiles, rolling her eyes just a little.

"But not too well." I add, as an afterthought. I don't know the depth of whatever it is between them, and I don't much care at the moment. I do know that Dimitri isn't the sort of man who I can see giving her the life I want my sister to have… a life without worry or decay.

She’s laughing as she turns to go, but it slips when she sees Claire rising from the chair. It’s strange, sometimes. She’s so strong and powerful in her own ways, that sometimes I forget how small Claire is. In moments like this one, it takes me by surprise again.

“I’m sorry.” Claire tells her, crossing the distance to her best friend. “For… running headfirst into brick walls.”

Rhea opens her mouth, and I’m not sure if she’s going to say something back or if she’s just surprised that Claire’s relenting. But Claire doesn’t give her a chance to say anything if she’d planned to. “I can’t explain why I needed to do it. Maybe I never will be able to explain why I needed to. But you’re right. I wasn’t thinking about you.”

“You don’t have to think about me.” Rhea sighs. “But I wish you would. Claire, I can’t lose you, but I feel like I am right now and it scares the hell out of me.”

I turn my back to them, offering them a little privacy. Their friendship was a thing long before I came into the picture, so I guess the least I could do is let them work out their problems in peace. I don’t leave the room entirely, finding my phone and looking down at the messages I’ve yet to acknowledge.

It’s been nearly a week since I iced Kent out, telling him that I wouldn’t prioritize the rest of them over Claire anymore. I don’t expect to see a missed call from him, but it’s there, his name red on the screen. A glance at the girls assures me they haven’t devolved into screaming or hair-pulling, so I hit the redial button, expecting to hear him launch into a monologue about how disappointed he is with me.

Instead, when he answers, he greets me coldly. “Boudreaux.”

I didn’t realize we were back on a last name basis, after everything we went through together. But I guess I can’t fault him for being upset with me. “Kent,” I say. “Is something wrong?”

“No.” His voice is terse, impatient. I can tell he didn’t want to answer, and he probably wanted to call even less. “I need a favor.”

I almost laugh at the irony of him asking for a favor after pouting because I told him I was done doing favors for others. I don’t laugh, though, because his next words chase away any of the irony or humor of the situation.

“I found her.”

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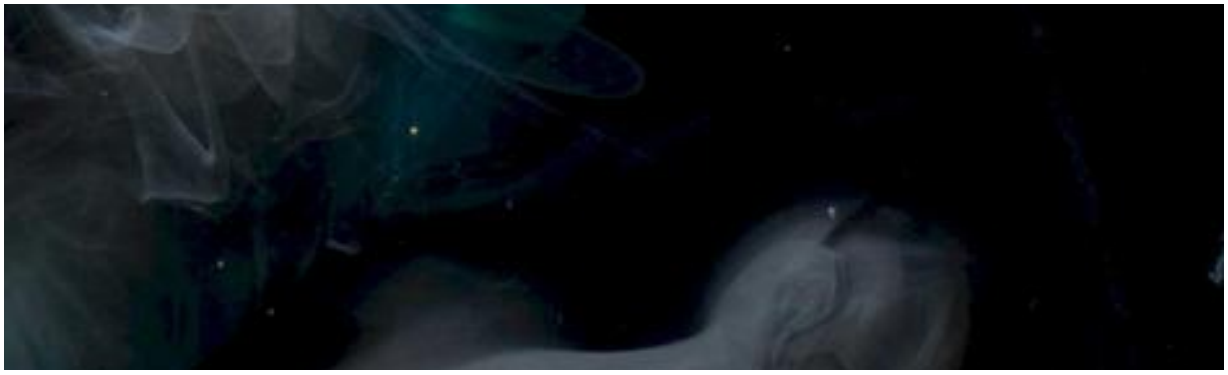

I honestly never expected that I'd return to Costa Rica again, but as we land at the airstrip and are greeted by a small group on the ground, something about it feels right. Michael is the only one I recognize from when he attended dinner with us. I don't think I even said two words to him that night and yet, he regards me like a dear friend he hasn't seen in a long time. He's already wrapping me in his arms, nearly crushing me against him as he lifts my feet off the ground before Remy's have even touched it.

"Knock it off!" Remy chides. "Or I'll send you back to Holland with one less hand than you started with."

Michael snickers, setting me down and grinning conspiratorially as he steps away. My head spins a little at the sudden rush of his affection, but the grin on his face makes me crack a smile, too. It fades when I get a look at the guys standing together behind him.

They're huge, tall and muscled, imposing with their thick arms crossed over their chests in similar fashion. Other than the heavy attitude and their obvious irritation, they don't share many physical similarities, so I assume they're not brothers, though the way they mirror each other tells me they must be close. And the way they glare at Remy tells me they must not be happy with him.

"Kent, Rich," Remy greets them with a simple nod.

"Boudreaux." Only one of them speaks, the other nods in return.

"This is Claire. She'll be staying with us for a bit. Claire, that's Kent, and this is Rich." He indicates the dark-haired one as Rich, and he at least

manages a charming smile for me. I don't doubt he's great at melting ladies with a smile like that, but as soon as he switches his attention to Remy, the hostility is back.

Nobody does anything to ease the tension until Michael opens the door and gestures me into the back seat with a grin.

"I'm sitting beside the pretty girl." He says, like he's calling dibs on shotgun. I can't help but laugh just a little at him. Maybe I'm just so absurdly tired, or maybe being back here, where I was the woman I want to become again, has me feeling lighter than I have in ages. Either way, I slide into the center seat and Remy follows, sandwiching me between him and Michael, who comes around to let himself in on my other side.

Before he shuts his door, I hear Rich say, "I'd give it all up for a girl like that too."

I'm not sure what he means by that, but it's obvious the words were meant for Kent, who cranks open the passenger side door and climbs in without saying another word.

The ride back to Remy's home is awkward, with Kent and Rich in the front seat glowering, and me with the sneaking suspicion that they don't like me. I'm not sure what I did to them personally, since this is the first time I've met either of them. I didn't even know they existed, so I can't imagine what I did to earn their displeasure.

Remy is silent beside me, lost in thought. He hasn't tried to touch me since the night I helped kill Addsion, and part of me worries that he's lost the spark for me. Part of me craves it, each time he moves his arm and I think he's going to pull me against him or when he looks at me for a second longer than necessary, and I think he's going to kiss me.

I'm so consumed with my own thoughts that I don't realize immediately that this isn't the path to Remy's home. Anxiety rises inside of me once I do, the churning feeling in my stomach mixing with the uncomfortable awareness that I'm in the car with two men who don't seem to have any affection for me. Remy must hear my shaky inhale as I try to stave off the memory of Jovich driving me into the middle of nowhere, Mac's needle in my skin. He looks up, realizing what I already have, and frowns.

"What are you doing? You passed the turn for my house."

"We're not going to your house." Rich says, like that wasn't already obvious.

Next to me, Michael places a steady hand just above my knee, prompting me to look up at him.

“It’s okay,” he promises. “You’re alright. No one’s going to hurt you here.”

“I’ll hurt you if you don’t take your fucking hand off her.” Remy spits, reaching over me to shove Michael’s hand off of me. There was no heat in Michael’s gaze, no interest for me, nothing sinister about his touch. Something about Remy’s possessiveness makes my chest swell, but I don’t know if it’s in a good way or not.

“What’s your ploy, Kent? To traumatize my girlfriend some more?”

Girlfriend.

It’s a weird word. It doesn’t sound right on his tongue, in the air, put out into the universe. It doesn’t seem to encompass any of the complicated nature of whatever exists between us.

“Christ, Boudreaux. You really are selfish, you know? This isn’t about you or her. It’s about taking responsibility for your actions. We’re going to the hotel.”

“No.” Remy’s voice is firm, leaving no room for argument, but I don’t think the men in the front seat care about what he wants right now.

“Jump out if you want,” Rich says, shrugging his shoulders a little. “But unless your girl is willing to follow you, she’ll be coming with us.”

“Dimitri told me what you did to Wes,” Michael says, leaning toward me just enough so that I know his words are for me, and yet keeping enough space that Remy doesn’t lunge across my lap to choke him. “I’ve already warned everyone not to fuck with you, you beautiful badass.”

Something about the way he says it makes me laugh, letting the anxiety peel back a little. I don’t have a clue what their plans are or where we’re going, but when we pull up to the clearly abandoned hotel, it’s not what I expected.

Despite the desolate parking lot and the sign that’s been cleared of its last message, it’s not a creepy sort of abandoned. In fact, the lush green mountains situated behind the building make it almost impossible to imagine anything nefarious going on here. But I know that beauty and darkness are not mutually exclusive, so when Rich cuts the engine, I still feel the slightest sense of unease. Particularly when Remy crosses his arms and refuses to get out of the car.

I've never seen him act like a child before, and as confused as I am by whatever the hell is going on, it's almost amusing.

"They need you, Rem." Michael says, opening his door and sliding out of the backseat.

"I'm done being needed." Remy snaps, turning to glare at Kent through the open door. "I told you that. I came here to help you because I owe you, but—"

"You owe them!" Kent growls, pointing to the building behind him. I follow the direction he indicates, confused, and catch the movement just as a curtain snaps back into place. The movement makes me stiffen, at first, and then I notice Michael offering me a hand.

It's mad to follow the man I barely know, but Remy's behavior seems more petulant than fear-based. I'm already sliding his way by the time Remy reaches out to try and stop me.

"Claire! Don't go in there."

"What's inside?" I ask, though I guess the better question would be *who's* inside. Remy hesitates a moment too long, so I slide the rest of the way out of the car, letting Michael help me avoid the mud puddle from a recent rainstorm.

Kent and Rich are already headed to the side of the building, with Michael and I following not far behind, when I hear Remy, cursing as he slams his door shut. He's at my side in a matter of seconds.

"I don't want you to see this." He tells me, catching my wrist so that I have to turn to face him.

"To see what?" I challenge, even though I somehow know he isn't going to answer that. I shake him off and close the distance to Michael, following him through the industrial looking door that the other two already passed through.

I expected an abandoned building to be dark inside, but we enter into something like a kitchen, which is not only well-lit, but it's clearly not abandoned.

Elaine looks up just as I recognize her, and the look on her face makes me laugh now that I know she wasn't the one responsible for poisoning me last year.

"Oh!" I'm glad she's not chopping anything this time, because she drops the potato and the peeler, letting them clatter to the Formica countertop. For

the first time, Elaine wraps me in her arms, pulling me against her chest. “Oh, thank God,” she sighs.

“Elaine.” I say by way of greeting. I let myself ease in her arms, appreciating her warm scent as whatever she was cooking clings to her. It’s an almost maternal embrace she sweeps me into, crushing my ribcage as she holds me tightly. When she pulls back, she studies my face, my body, without judgement or pity, both of which I appreciate her for.

“I’d like to talk to you later,” she says, patting me gently on the cheek. “After dinner, maybe? If that’s okay?”

I don’t know if we’re staying for dinner, but I idly hope so. The scent of garlic permeates the air, and the sizzling coming from the stovetop promises comfort food that I didn’t even realize I was craving. I nod at her, and she turns to get back to her work, clearly pleased about something.

“Taissa’s been begging to see you for weeks.” Kent says coldly, making my head turn to take him in. It’s clear his words aren’t meant for me, but Remy, who is standing just inside the now closed door, glowering. “I’ll show you to her room.”

“I don’t want to see her,” Remy snips, glancing at me. “Just give me a room I can take Claire to while you try to strong-arm me into playing the savior.”

“You’re not a fucking savior.” Kent snorts. “You’re the biggest pussy I’ve ever met. You put on a good show, though.”

Remy raises an eyebrow, looking bored. I’m not sure if Kent was just trying to bait him into something or if that’s how he really feels, but either way, Remy could care less. “I don’t want a room.” I say, turning to address Kent myself. “What is going on? What is this place? Who is Taissa?”

“You ask a lot of questions,” Rich murmurs, shaking his head as if I’ve just exhausted him.

“Taissa is one of the captives we freed from a brothel a few weeks ago. She’s just one of the ones who’s asked about him…” Kent’s eyes slip to Remy, letting him notice the obvious disapproval.

I can’t blame them for wanting an audience with Remy. He saved me, too, and that left a mark on me… maybe not an obvious one, but it did something to my soul. We had a connection before I was taken, but he showed up for me in my most hopeless moment, and that does something to your brain chemistry. I don’t honestly know how to separate any of it from the thing before it to try and decode my feelings for him.

I think I love him, but I don’t know what love is, what it is supposed to be. Somewhere along the way, all the different things I admired about him blurred together—the infatuation of my best friend’s mysterious and gorgeous older brother, my respect for him and what he does, the impossible to deny chemistry between us.

“Can I meet them?”

“Of course,” Michael says, at the same time Remy says, “Absolutely not.”

But it doesn’t matter what Remy says, because I’m already following the others out of the kitchen.

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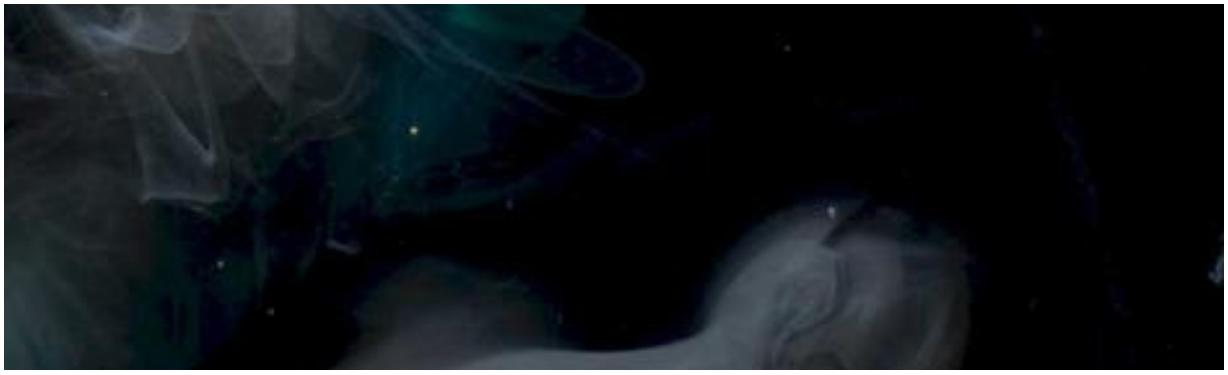

Not for the first time, I find myself marveling at my sister's best friend as Kent and Rich lead her on a tour of the place, explaining the setup they've worked to establish in such an impressive amount of time.

The entire ground floor serves as common area—the therapists have their sessions in the former meeting rooms, and group sessions in the larger business spaces. A library has been set up behind the check-in desk, and the lobby seating serves as a space for people to curl up with their books. Little tables from the breakfast area offer a neutral gathering space between meals.

Despite their insistence that people have been asking about me, we don't get swarmed as we walk through the hotel. In fact, most people just give us side-long glances, their eyes following our movements with unveiled curiosity. It's Michael who breaks first, leaving us to go chase after a woman who shyly looked away from him before running up the stairs. I have half the mind to yell for him to leave the girl alone, but he's been here when I haven't. Besides, this isn't my circus, and Michael isn't my monkey. Not anymore.

"You've done well." I tell Kent honestly as he leads us to the back of the building. He ignores me, opening up one of the doors to gesture to the enclosed swimming pool, where two guys are in the shallow end, sharing a close conversation. When they notice they're not alone anymore, the smaller of the two pushes away from his companion, his face red as if he's been caught doing something wrong.

Claire waves delicately at them, and then she notices the view beyond the pool and her mouth falls open in shock.

“Who’s the new girl?” The larger man in the pool asks, tipping his head toward her.

I assess him plainly, deciding he’s not a threat. His voice holds more curiosity than anything else, and the way he squints at her is predictably intrigued. I’m preparing to tell him to mind his own business when Claire introduces herself, kneeling on the concrete so she can extend a hand to them.

Her offer is met with hesitance on behalf of the smaller man, but the larger of the two only hesitates a second before standing to walk toward us. He’s younger than either of us, if I had to guess, though his dark eyes somehow make him look older.

“Luca,” he offers, slipping his wet hand into hers and shaking it.

“Claire.” She grins, glancing behind him to his friend. “And you?”

It’s Luca who speaks, jerking his head over his own shoulder. “Pollo.”

“Pollo.” Claire repeats, testing the name out for herself.

“Chicken.” Luca laughs. “Pollo means chicken. His real name is Pietro, I just call him that when he acts like this.”

Behind him, Pietro slaps the surface of the water, sending a ripple toward Luca that does nothing to stop him from laughing at his friends’ expense. Pietro dips beneath the water and swims further away from us, to the other side of the pool that looks out on the stacked mountains.

“Sorry about him.” Luca explains, dropping his voice. “He was locked up too long. It’s made him scared of people.”

“But not you?” Claire surmises, studying him.

“No.” Luca shrugs. “I’m just happy to be alive… to see the sky and not have to smell rot and shit.” He takes a deep breath as if to illustrate the point, then grimaces. “Sorry, I’m not great around girls…” His cheeks turn red as he reconsiders that. “I mean… women.”

“I’m not great around people in general right now,” Claire says, so quietly I wonder if it was just meant for herself. Kent and Rich have fallen away a little, and I’m out of her line of sight, just enough that she’s in arm’s reach of me.

Luca smiles sympathetically. “Where’d they find you? You weren’t with us,”

“No,” Claire agrees with a laugh. “Remy found me in his room, actually.”

Something about the way she says it almost makes me want to laugh with her. It's not much, but it's the sweetest sound, and I've just now realized how much I missed it.

"Did someone put you there?" Luca asks, glancing from her to me.

"I'll tell you the story sometime," Claire promises, standing up and letting his hand slip from hers finally.

"I'll hold you to it, new girl." He grins, turning with a flourish to swim toward Pietro. She watches them together a minute, something more than a friendship hanging between them, and yet something untested, new.

When she turns to face Kent, I see something in her that I haven't seen in months. Excitement isn't the right word, though it's something akin to it. Maybe eager, as she asks, "What else is there to see?"

Rich and Claire lead the way, and I should have realized that was a mistake. It gives Kent the perfect opportunity to fall back at my side.

"I'm surprised you haven't gone yet." I tell him, before he can say anything to me. "You know the jet is at your disposal."

"Yeah," Kent agrees. There's less vitriol in his voice now than there's been since I betrayed his expectations of me. Bringing up his wife has disarmed him, and now rather than him coming for me the way he's been all day, he's on the defensive. "I wanted to. Really, I did." He laughs a little bitterly. "Rich told me it was a bad idea, and he was right. Every cell in my body wants to go to her, but she's been in the same place for months. I saw her… photos."

I watch him chew his lip, wondering how Wes' friend helped him find photos of her. We've scoured the internet for even a trace of her, and we've got nothing every single time. "She looks good. Not broken or scared. She doesn't have bruises or scars, and I don't want her to—" He hurries to add that, lest he think I'm judging him. "But it's got me worried about what they did to her mind. Just because she looks like she's in one piece, doesn't mean she is."

I nod, knowing that all too well.

"You're scared?" I surmise.

"Fucking terrified." He snorts. "Wouldn't you be?"

"Yeah," I sigh. "I absolutely would."

For a moment, we share the silence. And then I ask, "So, when do we leave?"

“I don’t need your pity, Boudreaux.” Kent snips, turning away from me. “You said you’re done. Don’t break your principles on my account.”

“It’s not breaking my principles.” I tell him. “It’s unfinished business. I can do this one last thing for you, because you’ve had my back these last few months. Let me have yours.”

Kent considers me a moment, and then nods. “Dimitri is already working on a game plan. I’ll fill you in tomorrow.”

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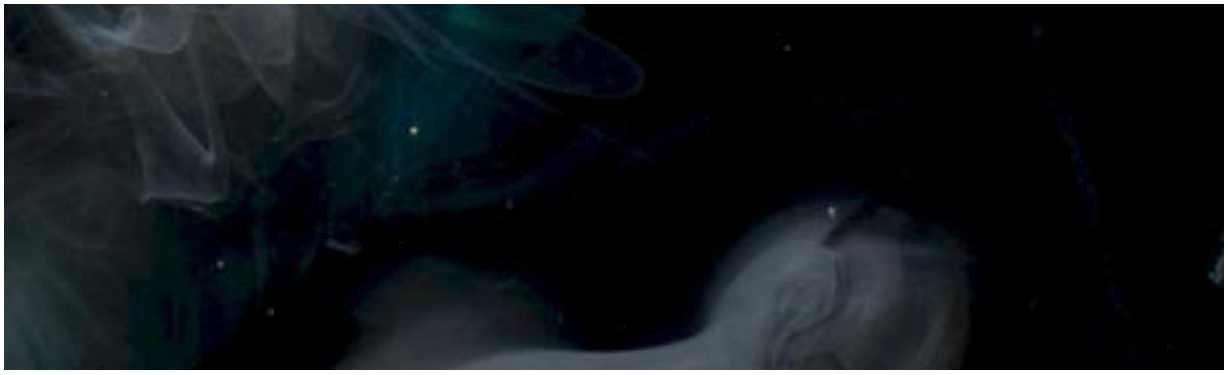

It’s weird, lying in bed next to Remy. We haven’t done anything more than innocent touch since the night I told him I can never love him. Maybe he took that to mean that I didn’t want him in my life, but I’m not sure how I even meant it… or if I did. I wanted to push him away, wanted to push Rhea away, wanted everyone to just fucking leave me alone so that my black hole heart wouldn’t rip them apart.

And now, suddenly I don’t want to be alone anymore.

It's why I’m grateful that he insisted if we were going to stay here, rather than going back to his house together, that we were going to share a room. I don’t think there’s any danger to be had here in their little compound, but after a week of having him just across the hall from me, the thought of having two separate rooms feels lonely.

The only problem is, now he’s asleep next to me, wearing nothing but his boxers and I can’t think about anything other than how badly I want things to go back to the way they were before I left. Given the chance to do it over, I wouldn’t have left in the first place—not because of everything that came after, but because it was a mistake to begin with.

I’ve always loved to swim, but I never realized I was drowning until he pulled me against him and helped me fight the tide. I thought I knew what I wanted, what I needed to do to get what I wanted. I thought a life with a husband and kids, and a stable home would feed the part of my soul that’s always been empty, and I justified leaving him because he couldn’t fill that hole.

Now I know the hole was never just for the normal life I thought I wanted—it was for the other part of me… the space where my sister should have been. I might never have known about her if I hadn't left him, but now I know that the problem wasn't him or me. The problem was the bitch who separated us, the one who made sure I would never have the love of a family because she stole me from everyone who ever cared about me up until Rhea.

The bitch is gone, but it's not as if that magically fixes everything.

I'll work on the whole sister thing in due time. Twenty-one years apart is a lot to try and make up for, and we've both got our own shit to work through, clearly. The more pressing matter is the man sleeping inches away from me. I briefly entertain the idea of climbing atop him and waking him with his cock in my mouth, but something tells me that wouldn't move the dial after it was said and done.

The air is thick and hot, and I've tossed and turned for hours by the time I sit up, abandoning the idea of sleep. Just like the first night I met him, I think I'll go out to the pool and try to burn the restless energy out of my veins.

I don't have a swimsuit, and I'm not keen on going in my bra and panties, so I throw a large shirt over the tank that would have shown everything once it got wet, and step into a pair of shorts, gathering my hair off my neck.

I swipe the key card off the dresser and open the door as quietly as I can, hoping the light that filters in from the hall doesn't wake him. It doesn't reach far enough to touch him, so I slip out into the corridor and let the door close slowly behind me, ensuring it doesn't click too loudly into place.

The hallway is cooler, and I can breathe easier now that there's a physical barrier between us and I know I'm not going to launch myself, naked, onto his lap. I feel the heat coiled inside of me easing with each step I put between us, and I'm practically skipping through the hall, delirious with relief at the idea of getting out to the pool.

I stop as soon as I hear the sobbing. The sound sends a strange familiarity through me… not quite déjà vu, but too familiar to ignore the unsettling feeling it procures under my ribs.

Pinpointing the sound with which door it's coming from, I listen for a moment, torn between minding my own business or checking that everything is okay. I end up knocking on the door, the rapping sound

interrupting the soft sobs. I hear her try to stifle them, and then wait to see if I go away, but I don't. When I knock again, I hear movement on the other side of the door, and after a minute, it opens.

I haven't met the girl who appears on the other side, opening it slowly so that she can appraise me and try to decide whether I'm any kind of threat. I can tell by the wide eyes that she looks at me with that she's young… probably the youngest I've seen here. The whites of her eyes are red and raw, which tells me she's been crying for a while, and I suddenly remember that my eyes aren't back to normal yet, either. I'm probably a scary sight for a child right now.

"Are you okay?" I offer, because it would probably be more unsettling if I ran away without following up with the reason I knocked on her door.

I know how stupid it is to ask that, even without knowing the extent of what these people have been through. I snapped at my best friend for asking such a useless question, for wasting my mental energy with filler words, and now I've done the same to this girl. To be fair, no one gives you lessons on how to be a victim, though the degree I've been working toward should have taught me how to *treat* a victim.

"Yes," the girl sniffles, doing her best to quell the tears still welling in her eyes, to hide them from me.

"I couldn't sleep." I tell her, talking simply for the sake of keeping her from shutting the door in my face… keeping her from being alone. "It's my first night here."

She manages a watery smile for me. "It's not bad here." She assures me. "You'll be okay."

"I'm Claire," I tell her. "What's your name?"

For a moment, I think she isn't going to give it to me. She holds her name like it's privileged information, and then she swallows whatever doubts she has about me.

"I'm Taissa."

Taissa. The girl who wanted to see Remy. I know for a fact she didn't, because he hasn't left my side but for a minute as Rich showed me around earlier. At dinner, I studied faces as best I could without being rude, and I don't remember seeing Taissa there.

"Are you hungry? I'm going to go find something to eat, but I'm afraid to go alone."

I see her hesitation in every breath as she glances back at the safety of her room, and then peeks out into the hall behind me. Pressuring her won't make her feel inclined to come with me, but my lie about being scared entreats her to not let me go alone.

"Okay," she agrees. "Just give me a minute to put a sweater on."

She manages a small smile for me when she returns, blinking away the last of the tears in her eyes. "You don't have to be scared here. These people… they're not like the rest."

"The rest?" I puzzle, unsure what she means by it.

"The rest of the world. It's cruel, evil." She shivers and pulls at the edges of her green hoodie. "They're different here."

I want to tell her that's not true, that there is still plenty of good in the world. I want to give her the confidence to return to a world full of strangers and think that everything will be alright, but I don't have it in me to lie to her. The truth is these people *are* exceptional.

Remy is exceptional.

I watch her out of the corner of my eye as she looks anxiously at the elevator we're approaching. I nod toward the door that leads to the stairwell. "Mind if we take the stairs? I'm restless… have to move as much as I can."

"Of course." Taissa says easily, looking grateful for my request. As we step into the stairwell, I realize how dark it is and grope for a light switch, but I don't feel anything. "They're motion activated, but they're a bit… finnicky. Should kick on in a minute."

She leads me into the stairwell, showing me that it's fine, but I stay rooted to the spot, my mouth suddenly dry.

"Claire?"

It's stupid to be scared of the dark after everything. Honestly, it is better to be alone in the dark than in the light with some of the monsters I know, but that thought doesn't make my legs move. Taissa steps in front of me, and then her hand closes around my wrist, drawing my attention.

"Are you afraid of the dark?"

"I know it's stupid." My voice is a whisper, strained past the heavy breaths slipping past my lungs. "I just…"

"It's not stupid." She says, cutting me off before I can say anything more. "Fear is how we know we're alive."

I blink, studying her delicate face. "Living hurts."

I don’t know what made me say it, and I kind of hate myself the minute it slips out. I’m supposed to be helping her, and here I am, whining about my fears to a teenager.

“It sure does.” Her lips quirk into a little smile. “Would it help if I sing?”

I’m not sure what she means until she tips her head toward the stairs that descend into the dark. “I’ll hold your hand and sing, so you know I’m with you.”

I feel so absurd that I want to cry and laugh all at once, the sound of the fire alarm filling the back of my skull and red lights cutting through my vision.

“Yeah,” I nod, slipping my hand into hers.

She begins singing the minute her fingers close around mine, and while I don’t recognize the melody and I think she’s singing in a different language entirely, her voice is beautiful and the sound is soothing. I feel for the banister with my free hand, using it to guide me down the stairs, and to ground me in reality. We’re halfway down the first set of stairs by the time the light flickers on with a resounding click that showcases the ugly linoleum walls. I don’t say anything, though I do breathe a little easier, and Taissa doesn’t stop singing, doesn’t let go of my hand.

We stay linked together the whole way downstairs, until we spill out into the hotel’s ambient-lit lobby.

It’s weird. I’ve spent the last week in a hotel with Remy, and now I’m here in this one with her, and suddenly, I realized it’s the first time I’ve stayed in a hotel. And the penthouse suite we occupied in Washington is hardly a real hotel experience. But this, with Taissa? It’s a weird first to note, but for some reason, I tell her anyway.

She stares at me for a moment, like she’s trying to imagine my life story, and then smiles a little. “It’s my first time in a hotel, too.”

The confession takes me by surprise enough that I stop walking to face her. I know why this is my first time in a hotel (or second, if I count it as a separate incident). I didn’t get vacations as a child—apparently the families I stayed with were too busy spending all their money trying to keep me to be able to enjoy a getaway. As an adult, everywhere I’ve stayed with Rhea has been lavish— someone’s home or a vacation rental.

“You’ve never stayed at a hotel?”

“No.” She laughs, glancing nervously around. “I… I didn’t have a normal childhood.”

“Me either.” I laugh ruefully, the memories of Addison’s confession making rage pool in my stomach. I can’t acknowledge it—I won’t acknowledge it in front of her.

I pull her in the direction of the kitchen, wondering if Elaine is up baking or something. I can’t imagine she ever gets a minute to rest with all these people to cook for. I hope Remy is compensating her enough for all the extra work.

“I’ve never been outside until the day they rescued us.”

Taissa’s words are rushed, like if she doesn’t say them fast, they’ll never get out. They give me pause to face her just as I turned the kitchen light on and notice her pallor for the first time. “What?”

She’s stark white, enough for me to see the web of veins under her skin. The irises of her eyes are the palest blue, a color like ice when she peeks up at me through her silver hair. And for her, my heart shatters. “My mom had me there. They let her keep me, because they said I was so sickly I’d die anyway. I never did, but when I was ten, she did. Her body gave up, and I had to step up into her spot.”

She bites her lip, like she thinks she’s said too much, and I bite mine to keep it from trembling. “You… stepped into her spot?”

“They don’t care for you for free.” She shrugs. “I got used to it.”

Her words feel like a knife to the heart, a stabbing pain that twists deep inside. It’s hard to breathe as I contemplate the honesty of her statement. I don’t know how anyone could ever get used to it, and I don’t even know exactly what *it* is.

“How old are you?”

I know I’m about to hate myself for asking, because the answer is terrible no matter what it is. But she wants to talk to me… I get the sense she hasn’t had many people to talk to lately. Despite that, she speaks well.

“My mom has been dead for five years, I think. So… fifteen?”

Despite my best intentions, a sob breaks from my chest, and I shake my head profusely. “I’m so sorry. I…”

“It’s okay.” Taissa shrugs. “You didn’t do anything.”

“No.” I sigh, wiping a hand over my face to clear the tears that are threatening to fall.

Five years of abuse, and fifteen of captivity. She was only ten when they started letting men…

“I need food.” I say, because it’s probably the only thing that will keep me from throwing up right now. And Taissa doesn’t need to bear witness to that. “What’s your favorite?”

She shrugs, as if she’s never really thought about it. “I stick to soup, usually, because of my teeth.”

I regret turning to her the minute I do and see her bracing her jaw, showing me her empty gums. I hadn’t even realized that the faint lisp I’ve been hearing wasn’t an accent.

I swallow the bile that rose to the back of my throat and manage a closed-lipped smile of my own.

“Well, how about mashed potatoes?” I pick up the box sitting on a shelf against the wall. It’s a well-stocked shelf, full of staples like beans and rice and canned goods. It looks like Elaine has prepared for nuclear fallout down here. Part of me thinks we may all be better off if that happened and we had to hunker together, cut off from the cruelty of the rest of the world.

When I see the blank look on her face, I have to wonder whether I’m the crazy one.

“You’ve never had mashed potatoes? Surely Elaine…”

“I don’t come to dinner with the rest.” Taissa says quietly. “Miss Elaine just brings my soup for me.”

“Oh.” I bite my lip, looking at the cans lined up on the middle shelf, broths, stocks, consommés. “Any preference?”

“I’ll try the potatoes, if you’re making them anyway.”

“Yeah?” I smile. “Are you sure? I don’t mind…”

“I’m sure. We’re sharing all kinds of firsts… may as well add this to the list.”

Something about the way she says it makes me laugh, so I open the fridge to get out the milk and butter. It’s lucky it’s an industrial size refrigerator, considering Elaine’s got it stuffed so full that the butter falls at my feet when I open the door.

“So…” I venture, filling the pot that I found hanging above the stove with water. “They rescued you guys?”

“Yes,” Taissa’s voice is quiet as she says it. I don’t want to push her to reveal anything more, so I simply smile at her, waiting to see if she feels like going on. “I’ve dreamed about stuff like that.” Her voice is low, almost like she’s embarrassed.

I lean in close to her, so that she knows what I'm about to tell her is just as much a confession as hers. She really is beautiful, like a porcelain doll. She even blushes a little, pink rising to dust the tops of her cheekbones when I tell her, "Me too."

I set the water to boil and appraise her, deciding whether I should go on. She's a child, which makes telling her things about myself strange, but at the same time, she's lived through more than many women do their whole lives. I guess that affords her a special sort of adult privilege. "I used to dream that it would storm hard enough to shatter the windows, and the house would fall away like paper, the water would flood in and sweep my bed out like a ship to the sea."

I laugh, because it sounds ridiculous to me now. I've been adrift at sea for years, looking for shore and unable to find it, unable to find a way to move forward. I thought I needed to know where I come from to know who I am, but truly, I don't think that's helped. Finding out your mother had it worse than you did kind of shatters the illusion that things will get better. They never did for her.

"That sounds lonely." Taissa says quietly.

I was always lonely as a child. But given the choice of feeling lonely in the company of monsters or feeling lonely at sea, I would still choose the latter.

"Yeah," I nod. "But in my dreams, it was peaceful."

"In my dreams, when they rescued us all, everything was just magically fixed." Taissa admits. "Not that way in real life."

I want to laugh at that, too, because it's wildly relatable. Instead, I shake my head. "It never is."

I can feel her watch me as I measure out the ingredients and pour them into the pot. "Did they rescue you, too?"

The question gives me a moment of pause, because I don't know how exactly to explain that. They did rescue me, of course. Remy did, the senator did, Rhea did. But I'm not sure how to explain that to her, or whether she needs that explained. "Yes, they did."

"Do they do this kind of thing often?"

"Rescue people?" I ask, because it sounds sort of silly.

She's a child, I remind myself again. She was pulled from the dark and brought into this world, so it's only natural that she might think this is some

sort of fairytale situation. Although, I guess I did think of Remy as an angel of vengeance.

I think of the night we killed together, when he told me that Giante would die whether I participated or not, how he assured me that the choice was mine alone, that what I was going to do would leave a mark on my soul.

I think of before that, when he came for me in the dark, when he killed Mac and Slick and kept me out of Wes' clutches. And then I think of his confession, of him telling me that he'd bought women before to set them free.

"Yeah," I swallow past the lump that suddenly feels like it's lodged itself in my throat. "I guess they do."

She's quiet again as I dole out our midnight snack, watching with the slightest hint of anxiety pulling her lips downward.

"If you don't like it, I can make you soup." I promise her.

Taissa nods nervously, swirling the fork through her mountain of potatoes, and then her eyes flicker to me as I eat mine. I don't have much of an appetite, honestly. Elaine's dinner was delicious and I ate as much as I could, and while that was hours ago, I'm not hungry. But even cooking something so simple has been a good distraction from the restless energy I couldn't get rid of.

"It's not the pinnacle of fine food," I tell her, savoring the melt in my mouth. "But it's a good comfort food."

That entices her to at least try, and when she does, it takes her by surprise. Her eyes even flutter a little as she moans, and I try not to laugh, but I fail. She doesn't seem bothered when her eyes open again, though, after a moment of savoring her first taste of something other than soup. I wonder how long she's been without teeth—at fifteen, your wisdom teeth haven't even come in yet.

"It's so good." She whispers, in awe.

I can't help myself—I chuckle again. "You're going to have to keep this our secret, or else I think Elaine will be jealous that you think me such a fabulous chef."

That gets a real laugh out of her. She tosses her head back, snorts, and then covers her mouth, embarrassed. When I only grin at her, she eases a little, and we eat in comfortable silence for a while.

She speaks out of the blue, when our plates are empty and our stomachs are full, and it pulls me from a haze I didn't realize I was in. I can tell by the

way she’s speaking that she must have been thinking about it for a while before she decided to voice it.

“It’s funny, isn’t it?”

“Hmm?” I blink, trying to figure out if I missed something she’d said previously. “What is?”

“How you’re afraid of the dark,” she whispers, like she doesn’t want to betray my secret to the dishes in the cupboards. “And I’m afraid of the light.”

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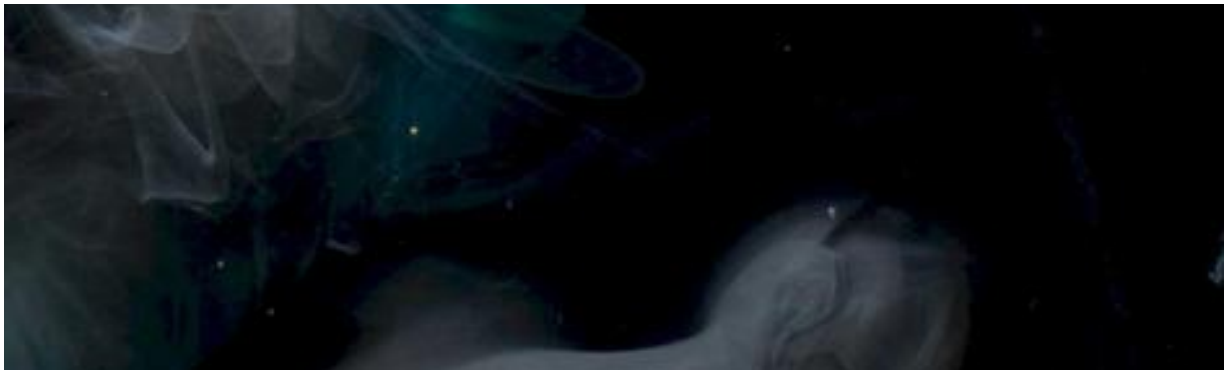

I’ve never watched a woman sleep until the day I had Claire in my bed during her recovery from their trafficking attempt. It was weird, how I couldn’t bring myself to look away from her for long, how I almost feared she would stop breathing, or that she’d disappear if I had my back to her too long, but I didn’t question it.

I’ve spent plenty of time watching her sleep this past week, since she hasn’t done much else. But watching her now, something about her is different. The muscles beneath her smooth skin are more relaxed, her brows aren’t pulled together the slightest bit, and she doesn’t clutch the sheet to her chest the way I’ve seen her do every day since she seized on us in the hospital.

She looks… peaceful. So peaceful that I don’t dare move.

I’m sure it wasn’t intentional, but at some time in the night, she moved toward me. Her fingers are splayed across my chest, her body tucked against mine. It feels right, in a way that nothing has in years… not since I’ve been able to understand just how depraved the world around us is.

Claire is a little bit of heaven in the hell I’ve been condemned to, and I don’t think anyone would blame me for holding so tight to it. I’ve been stupid in my attempts to deny myself, to deny her. I thought I couldn’t have her because others needed me but isn’t that the whole point of a relationship? Pretty sure it’s even in the vows somewhere… *“Forsaking all others”*.

But I’m not the only one who feels this way. Kent has already made that vow, and his wife was taken from him. We know where she is now, and I owe it to him to help him get her back. He didn’t leave me when it was Claire, so I won’t leave him now.

I stay still as long as I possibly can, afraid that shattering the moment will also shatter her peace. I know it’s been hard-won, little by little. When I finally slip away from her, I hate myself for leaving.

I hate Rich more for being entirely too chipper when I walk into the industrial kitchen to find him eating from a pot of mashed potatoes on the stove.

“Morning.” He grins around a mouthful of food as I head to the coffee maker.

“You’re cooking in Elaine’s kitchen?” I grumble, knowing that my housekeeper is going to be pissed if he makes a mess. Never mind the fact that he made mashed potatoes at eight a.m. before she even rose for the day. With that thought in mind, I make the maximum amount of coffee the pot can hold, hoping I don’t fuck it up this time.

“Not me. They’re cold.” Rich shrugs, unbothered, and shovels another spoonful into his mouth.

I shake my head, scrubbing my hand over my face to try and chase away the last of my irritation.

“So, what’s your game?” I ask him, when I open my eyes to find him scraping the rest of the food from the bottom of the pot. He glances at me, confused, before putting the pan into the sink and rinsing it clean. When he turns back to face me, there’s a crinkle between his brows.

“My game?”

“Yeah. Your game. I’m done with this vigilante shit. I was looking for revenge, but I found something better. I know Kent already told you I’m not going to keep doing this, which is why you iced me out yesterday. I’ll help him recover his wife.”

Rich nods his understanding. “Honestly, can’t say I blame you. I wouldn’t want to risk it all either, if I already had it all.”

I want to tell him I don’t have it all, but I kind of do. Maybe Claire isn’t quite back to herself yet, but she will be, and then I *will* have it all. Because I don’t need anything more than her.

“That’s the difference between Kent and I, though.” Rich says. “I went to the military because I didn’t have any other idea what to do. But Kent? He’s

always wanted to be a hero. This shit fills his cup, or whatever the saying is."

"Speaking of filling cups…" I hold up a mug in offering, and when he nods, I pour him some of the coffee that's churned out into the decanter.

The slight grimace when he tastes it suggests what I confirm when I taste it, nearly scalding my tongue on it.

Fucking *disgusting.*

Damn it. I can taste the grounds, and when I peer down at it, it somehow looks like a weak tea. I abandon it and turn back to find Rich doing the same. Costa Rica has some of the best coffee beans in the world, and I can't make a good cup to save my life.

"So, you're not going to stick by his side? I told him the keys to the kingdom are his. He can have my bank account, the hotel, the jet… I don't want any of it. If he wants to keep going on these missions so he can play the part of someone's hero, I'm happy to give him every tool in my arsenal. But what about you? We're going to get his wife back. Where do you fit into that?"

"I don't know." Rich says honestly. "I don't know if I can turn my back on them, but this was never my fight."

I don't press him for any more of an explanation, because it would be hypocritical of me. The things we've seen, what we've done… it's the kind of thing that alters your brain chemistry. It takes everything you are, everything you believe in, twists it up until it's something else entirely, and then spits it back out. He doesn't have any skin in this game, which is exactly why I'm curious what he'll do when I take my bride and run off to a little cottage on the French countryside. It would be nice to live in the middle of a field, somewhere, but then I remember Claire's love for water. Maybe if we live on a lake? I'll leave it to her to decide.

"I have a cousin who died the second year I was enlisted." Rich says, so suddenly that it takes me a minute to remember that I'd even asked him a question. "He was murdered."

"Shit." I mutter. "What happened?"

"He was shot and left to bleed out in a bar parking lot." Rich's jaw tenses. "His boyfriend is in prison right now, but I don't know. It never really felt like justice was served, you know?"

"Sometimes it never gets served… unless we take it upon ourselves to serve it."

He points a finger in my direction, as if I've just said exactly what he was thinking. "So maybe I'll serve it up."

"Might be kind of hard to do if he's already in prison."

"Mm." He shrugs, as if that's just a minor detail. "I don't know. I always had my doubts about whether he did it. Besides, he's only in on some bullshit charge that'll have him out in a few years… sooner, if he's behaving in there." Rich shrugs again, like he's realizing that thinking about this isn't serving him right now. It's just as well, since Kent joins us in the next minute.

"Jesus." I mutter. "Did you sleep?"

He looks like shit, and I know the answer to the question so I'm not sure why I even asked.

"Coffee will do," he says, gesturing behind me. Rich chuckles as I step aside, deciding to let him figure it out on his own. We both watch as Kent pours himself a cup, barely aware of his audience, blows on the top, and takes a sip… which he immediately spits back into the cup. "Christ, Boudreaux. This your swill?"

I can't help laughing as he wipes at his tongue like that will erase the memory of the taste and then stalks over to the sink to dump the whole pot down the drain. He may be mad at me right now, but over the last few months, we've formed a casual enough friendship that I don't feel bad watching him cringe at the taste. "I'd offer you mashed potatoes, but Rich ate them all."

Kent scowls, probably wondering why we're talking about mashed potatoes, and then rakes his hands through his hair. "I was up all night coordinating everything. We make our move today, or we miss our chance for a month." Rich nods automatically, but Kent looks to me for approval. "I can't wait another month."

Neither can I.

The sooner I get this over with, the sooner I can set fire to this life that I've inherited and take the one that I want—the one with Claire and not constantly looking over our shoulder. I'm going to take her so far off the grid that even Wes' friend's recovery software won't be able to find us. I never fashioned myself a lumberjack, but Rich standing there in his flannel could probably teach me a few pointers. "I understand."

"Declan's software only hits on her face every thirty days during the spring and summer months… in Jarbidge, Nevada."

“Nevada?”

I guess the surprise must be evident in my voice, because Kent nods. “About nine hours from Vegas, which is a hub for all sorts of lowlife thugs. It makes sense.”

I nod my agreement. Las Vegas has an exorbitant cash flow. Money turns over so fast there that it would be easy to wash.

“But what’s in Jarbidge?”

“No clue.” He says. “It doesn’t look like much, honestly. It’s an old mining town. She’s a fucking ghost until once a month when she goes into some sort of shop. Declan said it’s some sort of webcam that’s catching the photos.”

I can tell that the anxiety of that is enough to make him want to put his fist through a wall. How do you go for an entire month between sightings?

“Okay.” I nod. “So, what do we need?”

“It doesn’t look like we need anything. I’d run surveillance if we had more time, but—”

“I know.” He doesn’t need to remind me again. I know it’s been years since he saw her last, since she disappeared off the face of the earth. We’re doing this the best that we can as fast as we can.

“The three of us, Michael and Rook? A five man team seems like a bit of an overshot, honestly, but—”

“It’s better to be overprepared.” I agree. “Let me track down the others.” I take two steps toward the door and come to a dead stop when I see Claire standing there, watching us. I wonder how much she heard.

“Where are you going?”

I don’t know if it’s fear in her eyes or just a general distrust, and when I say nothing, she turns to the others.

They have no allegiance to her. Kent’s honestly been more of a dick to her, pretending she doesn’t exist, then I’ve seen him be to anyone. Sensing that she isn’t going to get an answer, she walks past us and sets about making another pot of coffee. Rich even fills the decanter with water for her.

As he passes it to her, Rich takes it upon himself to tell her the truth. “We’ve got a mission. Gotta get Kent’s wife back for him.”

“Your wife?” Claire turns to Kent, whose stare softens when she faces him. He nods, and then decides to tell her everything.

“She was kidnapped when I was in the service. Her entire life was just wiped away, like she never existed, but now we’ve found her.”

“Oh my God.” Claire breathes, clearly startled by that information. She nods curtly, and then her eyes meet mine. “I’ll be ready in five. I just have to go change.” She glances down at the pajamas she’s still wearing, a shorts set that is a remarkable improvement over the sweats. I didn’t mind those, really, but I hated how she hid her legs from me… legs I have thoroughly enjoyed her wrapping around me. Now I wish she’d put on the damn sweats before coming down, especially because Rich lets his eyes linger on her for just a touch longer than I like.

“I agree that you need to change,” I say gently, “but you’re not going with us.”

Claire frowns, her lips jutting out into a pout that simultaneously makes me want to shake her and kiss the frown away. The last week has been the longest of my life, waiting for signs that she’s still in there, and suddenly, she’s coming back to me, little by little.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s dangerous.” Rich answers for me. “She was kidnapped… whoever took her might decide they like you, too. You’re a distraction.”

“That’s rude.” Claire laughs, not seeming too put out despite herself. The coffee pot begins to churn, the only sound in the room as we all watch her. When she turns to Kent, her face is serious. “You’re a military man, right?” Kent nods curtly, looking none too impressed with however she managed to discover that. “So, you’re not exactly a paragon for safe and soothing.”

“I’m her *husband*.” Kent snips, his shoulders squaring like he’s getting ready to fight the woman in front of him despite the fact she’s over a foot shorter than him and far too thin. I noticed that she seemed smaller when I first saw her in the hospital room, but seeing her stand before Kent is a reminder of how much she’s slimmed, losing unnecessary weight that softened her figure. I guess Moose was right, when he said that Claire wasn’t good. I should have believed him. I wasn’t good either.

“You were. Legally, you *are*. But you don’t know what she’s been through. She could be confused, scared. Depending on what she’s been through, just the sight of any man could trigger her, and yet you’re going to go after her with four other men?”

I step quickly in front of Claire, just in case Kent acts on the look he’s fixing her with, which tells me he’s considering punching her in the throat. I

can’t imagine he’s the type to ever lay a hand on a woman, but I’m not taking chances.

“You think I haven’t thought about that?” Kent scoffs. “All I’ve thought about was her and what she’s going through! Whether she’s still holding on for me, or if she thinks I abandoned her, whether she’ll ever let me hold her again…” His voice is dangerously close to breaking, and before he turns away to compose himself, I see the tears in his eyes.

“She will.” Claire assures him, stepping around me to move to his side. “But maybe not today. Maybe not this month. She’ll come back to you if you wait for her, but don’t do her the disservice of expecting her to fall right back into the way you were. Because she won’t be the same person she was before, either.”

There’s a pause as we all consider her words. They resonate, in a way I’m not even sure Claire realizes holds true for us. She isn’t the same girl she was that first night I met her, when I first began to fall for her even though I was too stupid to realize it. She’s not even the same girl she was before I broke her heart by refusing to give her the life she wanted from me. I’ve fallen in love with her a few times, each time not realizing it was with a different iteration of her. Even when I wanted to hurt her for her reckless compassion, I was falling harder for her.

But I don’t just love the versions of her that she’s been. Even in this moment, stubbornly trying to argue us into submission, I love her light. She can’t even see it, but I can’t *not* see it. It’s still there, despite how many people have tried to take it from her.

Loving her, I realize, isn’t enough. I have to tend to her light… to keep it burning instead of just admiring it. Even when doing so may not always be to my taste.

Kent turns back to meet my eyes, seeking my permission to confirm what he’s already realized. “She’s right.”

“She usually is.” I agree, waiting for her to turn to me. When she does, there’s a little smirk on her face. “Go get ready while I gather the others.”

The minute she’s gone, Rich lets out the laugh he’s at least been trying to hold back. “God damn, Rem. You’ve got it bad.”

He isn’t wrong. This love I have for her? It’s the strongest thing I’ve ever felt… and the most terrifying.

I help myself to the coffee Claire made, enticed to try again by the heavenly aroma. When it touches my tongue, I decide that even if it weren’t

for the rest of it, I'd have to keep her for her coffee-making skills alone.

"Don't worry, Rich," I assure him with a clap on the shoulder before I head out the door, the mug clutched in one hand. "Maybe one day you'll find someone who you love. And, more unlikely," I smirk, "someone who will love you back."

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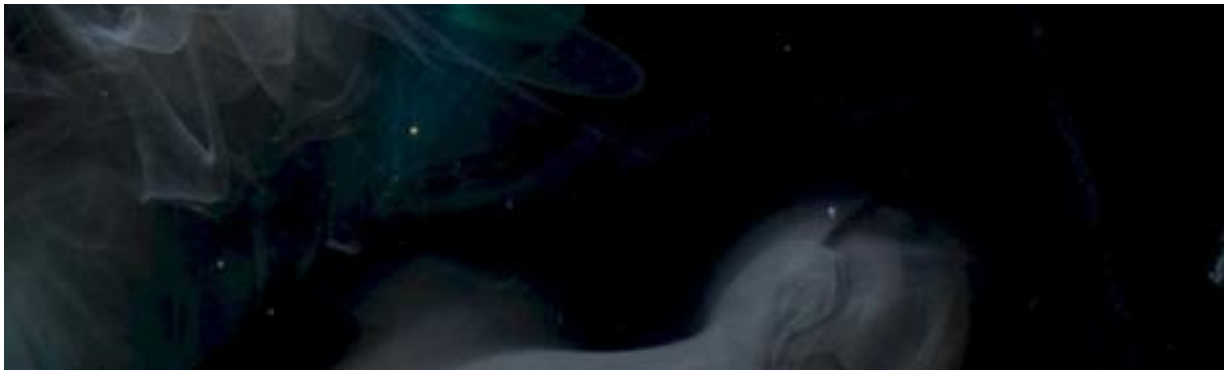

I didn’t know what to wear to a rescue raid or whatever they’re calling this, so I’m in jeans and a black top, boots that look like Kent’s, and I’ve pulled my hair back into a ponytail. I’m not sure why I have to wear boots since Remy has assured me a dozen times that I will not be getting off the jet, but I’m ready for combat anyway. At least, I would be if I was Lara Croft in Tomb Raider.

The truth is, I’m woefully under qualified to be here. There are therapists set up in the hotel back in Costa Rica, who are far more knowledgeable about how to handle victims of abuse than me. But I suppose there’s something to be said for lived experience. I’ll just treat Kent’s wife the way I’d want to be treated—not like an infant, and not like she’s made of glass.

I’ve somehow desensitized myself to flying what with all the back and forth I’ve been doing, so I don’t sleep on the plane. Instead, I sit neatly at Remy’s side on the couch, wanting so badly to lean against him, to curl into his chest and just let him warm me. But I don’t, because I’m afraid to touch him. And what’s worse, is that I think he’s afraid to touch me.

Rook, who looked familiar as he was being introduced, it turns out, is the bouncer from the nightclub where we went dancing our first night in Costa Rica. The club, which I just found out, Remy owns. It’s a shock, but I guess it isn’t as weird as him owning a whole ass hotel in the middle of the jungle. He explained it away as something about diversifying his income and I suspect owning multiple businesses probably makes it easier to move assets around.

And then I guess they decide if I'm in it, I'm going to be *in it*, because they tell me things I never would have imagined.

Rich regales me with war stories, Michael comes up with a few anecdotes from his time running security for some random billionaire, and as the mood starts to deteriorate, Kent decides to bring things down even more by telling me all about their last mission…

When he mentions the senator and his wife, my stomach twists uncomfortably. I'm guessing that they don't know what I do—that the man who came to their aid with the plane they needed is my father, and his dead wife, who I killed, is the reason my whole life has been a series of struggles.

Sensing my discomfort, Remy grazes his fingertips over my arm, and my heart accelerates. "That's where they all came from? The people in the hotel?"

"Yep." Kent says, his voice flat as if he's bored, even though he's the one who decided to tell this story in the first place. "We saved them… all, but one."

Remy stills for a minute, and when I turn to him, he looks like he's swallowing glass. "One in… what? Sixty?" I shake my head. "That's amazing."

"Amazing?" Kent laughs. "It's not amazing. That one woman could be someone's whole world."

"Come on, man." Rich says, glancing at me apologetically. "We don't need to talk about this here."

"We do, actually." Kent assures him, his eyes on mine. "Remington here thinks that he can just walk away and abandon the people who need him. He thinks that he just gets to forget all of the people who are still waiting in the dark for someone to save them."

"Knock it off," Remy warns him, flexing his neck to one side to ease some of the tension in him. It does nothing to alleviate the tension in the plane, though.

"What's the matter?" He laughs. "Don't want your girl knowing that you're a fucking coward?"

"What the fuck?" Rich mutters, running his hands through his hair, exasperated. "That's wrong, man."

"What's *wrong* is running off into the sunset with his little obsession over there and ignoring the world bleeding at his feet."

Remy scoffs, seeming more annoyed than insulted. “We’re going to rescue *your wife*, Kent. What more do you want from me?”

“I want you to not turn your back on them.”

“Jesus, Kent.” Michael groans, standing and rolling his shoulders, too. “I need a drink.”

“What’s he talking about?” I ask, looking among their faces to try and glean a little bit of context.

“Kent doesn’t want me to retire,” Remy rolls his eyes as I turn to take him in. “So, he’s acting like a petulant child.”

“Retire?” I clear my throat, not even sure what that is supposed to mean.

“Yeah, as in leave it all behind. You know, ignore the fact that his enemy is still out there, and the empire of other people’s bodies that he’s sitting on top of has barely begun to crumble.”

I’m not sure what I’m supposed to say. I didn’t realize the extent of what Remy was doing these days, and it’s got to be exhausting. But then I think about Taissa and all the people like her… my sister.

“What do you suggest?” I ask.

“We keep going.” Kent says. “We can’t abandon them.”

“Of course.” I agree with him, truly, but that doesn’t mean that what he’s suggesting is even possible. “But what is that going to look like? We’re about to get your wife back, and you probably already know, but it’s not going to be easy. You’re going to have to be patient with her, spend extra time with her making sure she knows you aren’t giving up… how do you plan to maintain that balance yourself?”

“I don’t know.” He swallows his grudging admission. “But we’ll figure it out. We have to.”

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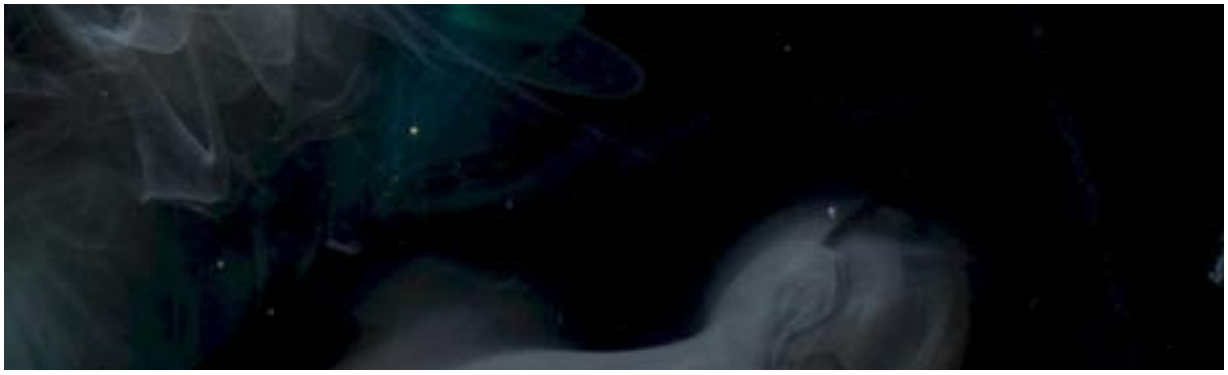

When Simon lands us in the middle of the field, I have to wonder if we're really in the right place or whether this was all some elaborate hoax. There's nothing in eyesight—not a single place I could see captives being stored. Of course, she could be with a private buyer, but none of the buyers on Davos' radar would live out here in the middle of nowhere.

Claire stands just a second before I do, getting to her feet as the plane's just barely touched ground. I push her back down without a word and shake my head.

"The deal for you to come was that you stay here. So, *stay*!"

Her lips part in surprise, but she has no response for that until I've already turned my back. "Back to treating me like a bitch in heat?"

Michael chuckles as he brushes past me to join Kent and Rich. I hear Rook's little gasp of shock from where he's leaning against the bar top, but I ignore him as I turn back to Claire. "Don't tempt me sweetheart."

Despite the fact that I'm entirely serious, I realize she's laughing, having stood up again. More than that, though, her eyes are full of something like… desire. It's the first hint of it I've seen since that night I fucked her on my boat… the last time things between us had been right. I was mad at her for prioritizing Wes over her own safety, but otherwise, we'd been so good. Now, there's the first sign that we are getting back to who we were… *what* we were.

"I can come with you."

“You’ll come *on* me…” I tell her, not caring whether Rook or any of the others hear. They’ll figure it out when I take her to the room anyway. “When I get back, I’ll remind you of what a bitch in heat really needs.”

Claire grinds her jaw together, trying not to look amused lest it take away from the fact that she clearly wants to be in the action. “I can help, Remy. I can…”

I shake my head. “I don’t doubt you could, baby. I’ve seen what you can do, but if you’re with me, I won’t be able to focus on helping anyone else.” I press my forehead to hers so that I can whisper the words over her lips, without Rook hearing this one… not because I care, but because these words are for her alone. “Watching you get vengeance is the sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever seen. Don’t make me compromise my team for you, because I would in a heartbeat.”

I feel the gasp rather than hear it, our mouths are so close together. I let her have that air a moment before I seal my mouth to hers and steal it back. I kiss her harder than I ever have, enough that I think I feel her knees go weak as she loses a little bit of the resolve she’d been holding onto.

Her breath becomes mine as her hands come up my neck, pulling me tighter against her. For a moment, I think she may be trying to meld us into one, to flatten ourselves into a single body. I take advantage of the moment, knocking her back onto the couch without following.

She’s boxed into the seat by my arms braced on the couch, and when she opens her eyes to see that, her lips still parted, waiting for my return, I trace them with my thumb. I want to do so many things to these lips, to her. We have a lot of time to make up for, and we’ll start as soon as I get back.

Pulling away from her is agony, but I’m sure Kent and Rich are already getting irritable, so I force myself away.

“Now stay… or I’ll have Rook put a leash on you, too.”

Red flushes up on her cheeks, and I think about making her do that over and over, again and again.

My cock is hard, aching at the thought of leaving her, but if I don’t go now, I may never make it off this jet. Rook hands me the Kevlar vest on my way out, and an unspoken command passes between us. He knows to protect her with his life, and I know he will if it comes to it.

But before I get to the door, her voice calls my name, prompting me to look back. Beyond the desire written so obviously on her delicate features, I

can see something else… realization, maybe, though I'm not sure what for until she lets out a shaky breath.

"I love you."

The words come out in a rush, like she's afraid that if she doesn't get them off her tongue in that moment, that she never will.

It's probably the worst timing for such a confession, but it's not unwelcome. I glance out the door, where my men are waiting, and then back to Claire, who looks absolutely terrified, as if somehow, I won't say it back… as if I were capable of such cruelty.

I would burn worlds for her, turn my back on anyone, kill so she can bathe in the blood of her enemies. But I'd never hurt her… I never will again.

Fuck it.

I close the space between us in an instant as if she's just reeled me in by some invisible thread and drop to my knees so that I'm level with where she sits, leaning forward nervously.

She's a marvel.

And now I know why the works of art in the Louvre bored me so much when I was younger. It's not because I don't have an appreciation for fine things. It's because I knew that when I saw something worthy of all that fanfare, I'd know. Back then, I would have never imagined something—someone—as beautiful as this.

"I've loved you from the first moment I saw you. I just didn't know it then."

Her lips tremble as they fall open, preparing for words she can't yet find. I don't give her the chance. Instead, I consume her again, pulling her against me with a hand on the back of her head and tilting her to give me deeper access to her. She tastes as heavenly as she looks… my perfect angel, fallen for the son of the devil. I thought she was my temptation, but she's my salvation, the only thing that may still be capable of saving my soul. And I'll lay it down for her to take if she wants it, because I'm suddenly struck by the realization that I'll give her anything she wants for the rest of my life…

Including in this moment.

Fuck.

When she feels the barrel of the gun, she pauses just long enough to give me the strength to pull away from her. Her eyes are on mine, seeking

answers. “You remember the first time on the boat?”

It takes a moment, and then recognition dawns on her pretty face. “I know you like knives, but I’m not taking you out there with only a blade standing between you and the unknown. Can you handle this?”

She finally looks down at the piece I’ve rested against her thigh, and when her eyes flit back to me, there’s no hesitation or fear in her eyes. I know Dimitri taught her how to shoot when I first sent him after her, so I’m not worried about that part. And I shouldn’t be worried about whether she has the nerve to pull the trigger. I can see the resolve in her eyes.

When her hand slips in mine, she takes the gun in her other, and I pull her to her feet. I hold out the Kevlar vest I tossed aside a moment before, and when she looks at me questioningly, hold it out for her to slip an arm through. She must sense that the only way I’m willing to relent on this is if she’s got the vest on, to offer me just a little peace of mind.

Rook blinks at me in surprise, but when I only stare at him in response, he nods his understanding and grabs his rifle off the bar top. When the others turn to see us, they similarly don’t object.

Maybe it’s not the best choice I’ve ever made, but I know it’s not the worst either. If I left her here, no matter how capable I think Rook is, and something happened to her, I would never forgive myself. I’ll never forgive myself if something happens to her anyway, but at least this way *I* can be the one to keep her safe. When Kent’s eyes lock with mine, I know what he’s thinking without him having to say it, and his quick nod tells me he’ll do whatever he has to in order to protect her. Both Kent’s wife, and the woman I’m going to make mine, are the priority tonight. He relays the information to the others, who nod without hesitation.

Something feels wrong from the first moment I taste the stale evening. It hangs like dead air around us, and despite the thick forestry that surrounds us and the full sun sinking slowly into the mountains, there’s not a fucking sound to be heard. No birds, no crickets, not even the buzz of a mosquito. I brush a kiss to Claire’s knuckles before letting her hand fall from mine so I can tighten the grip on my gun and ensure she’s got hers at the ready.

I don’t like this one bit, and I turn to Kent, who nods his agreement with my unspoken command. He takes point, brushing forward through the tall grass around us. He briefed us all on the way here about what the plan is, where exactly we’re headed.

The town is four miles north, which is too far of a walk… and the precise reason he had the dirt bikes delivered ahead of time, thanks to a friend of a friend who apparently lives somewhere in the state. We only have to walk a short distance to find them, the lights of the jet illuminating the space ahead of us where they've been left. It's pitch dark around here outside of that light, the sun having disappeared entirely in the space of seconds, as if even it didn't want to stick around in this place longer than it had to. I make a mental note to give Simon a raise just as he cuts the lights, plunging us into the dark night.

Kent switches on the flashlight mounted atop his scope, and the others follow suit. They've naturally fallen into a V shaped pattern, the way we have the other times, though right now, Claire and I are situated behind him, with Rook at the back and Rich and Michael on either side, forming a ring. I wonder whether any of them play chess or whether it was just Kent's command, but they move in all the right ways to protect the queen—my queen.

The keys are all in the ignitions—all four of them.

"We're one short." Michael says, as Kent wastes no time swinging his leg over the closest one and getting himself in position.

"Two," Claire corrects him, prompting a laugh from me. It dies when I grip her around the waist and swing her over the back half of the bike next to Kent's. She turns to me, bewildered, and I want to savor the look of surprise on her face, but I don't have time. "You're with me, sweetheart."

"You know how to drive this thing?" she asks, skepticism mingling with a hint of apprehension in her voice.

"Do you?" I challenge, as if I would have let her try.

"No, but—"

I laugh again as I climb over and flex my hands on the grips, my rifle situated across my legs and secured by the strap around my neck. It's been a minute, but you never forget how to ride a bike. Next to us, Michael grumbles about having to hop on the back of Rook's bike.

"Relax, Claire." I tell her over my shoulder. "I've got this."

"You're a secret biker?" She challenges, a bit of her old sass creeping in.

"Guess you'll find out. You trust me?"

There's no hesitation before she says 'yes', and I have to ignore how that makes me feel so that I can focus on the situation at hand.

"You better hold on tight." Rich warns her.

I just see the smirk on his lips before he sinks onto his own bike, and then Claire does as she's told, wrapping her arms around me and sliding closer, so that she adheres to my back. Her gun's in her right hand, and I glance down to make sure she's got the safety off before I turn the bike on, overwhelming any further complaints or banter.

Kent blazes the way again, forging forward so that he can lead us. We go single-file, Rook and Michael then me and Claire, with Rich bringing up the rear.

I hear Claire's surprised yelp as we take off, and then she wraps herself against me tighter and I can feel how tense she is as we rip over the uneven terrain. But the bikes were made for this, and I've had a lot of time to explore my hobbies, so I know she's safe with me. I just have to make sure she knows that.

It only takes a few minutes—just like when I had her on my boat for the first time, her fears fade, and I can feel her relax against me. She still holds tight, just the way she was told to, but I can feel the tension disappear, and a tension of another kind starts to grow as she leans her head between my shoulder blades, her cheek flush with my back. No interest in watching the path we're creating, no fear of us careening over a cliff—just implicit trust. And as she giggles when we bounce over a large rock, *joy*.

It shouldn't surprise me that my girl is a secret adrenaline junkie. I've seen what she's capable of. Even if you don't particularly enjoy killing, it comes with a massive rush of adrenaline, and that at least, feels good… though maybe not as good as flying through the night with her at my back acting as my wings, carrying us both.

Kent follows the path he's laid out in his head, and I keep my eyes on him the whole time, even while my head is in another place entirely. It's hard to focus on what sordid shit we may run into when I'm carrying a little piece of heaven with me, but when the little town unfolds before us, Kent goes dark. One by one, each of us follows suit, driving through the darkness on faith in a greater purpose… or trust in Kent's ability to see at night.

We don't go far in the dark before Kent cuts his engine and slides off his bike, readying his gun instead. When I stop beside him and climb off to help Claire down, her face is lit by the moon and I'm not sure she's ever looked more ethereal.

"So, you *are* a secret biker." She says, looking me up and down. "You're a surfer, a biker, a billionaire. Is there anything you *can't* do?"

“I can’t make a good cup of coffee to save my life,” I tell her honestly.

Claire only stares at me a moment, trying to decide whether that was a joke. After a moment, she laughs.

“Don’t sound so impressed,” Michael says, hopping off the back of Rook’s bike before it’s even come to a complete stop. “Billionaires have lots of time to practice their hobbies.”

“He’s right.” I admit, wrapping my arms around her without pulling her off the seat just yet. “Besides, just because I can do those things doesn’t mean I do them *well*… though I’m willing to continue to do them for you. I get the sense you enjoyed the ride?”

“Yes.” She bites her lip, and suddenly I want to take her on a ride of another kind. Jesus, she’s got me fucked up. We’re in a potential life or death situation, and all I can think about is getting inside of her.

In that single moment on the plane with her banter, all of the worry that I lost her to depression or PTSD was gone. In that moment, she promised me that she’s still in there even after everything, and that gives me all the hope in the world. I know that healing isn’t a linear path, and I know that there will be bad days, bad periods, depressive days. But I know now that we can coax each other out of them.

And now that I know that, I’m more full of hope for the future than I ever have been.

“I sure as fuck didn’t enjoy the ride.” Rook grumbles, stealing me from my thoughts of waking up to Claire’s face every day for the rest of my life. “Michael’s dick touched me.”

“What?” Claire snorts, so taken aback by the confession that she can’t help herself.

“I can’t control the monster,” Michael defends himself. “It’s not like I *wanted* to be pressed up against you. I should have fucking walked.”

I hoist Claire off the back of the bike, and when she’s on the ground, can’t resist planting a kiss on the top of her forehead.

“You *will* be walking on the way back if you don’t figure out how to reign that fucker in. Don’t you wear boxers?”

Michael’s scoff tells us all we need to know. “You can’t cage a wild animal.”

For a minute, I think Rook may punch him. But then Rich clears his throat, tipping his head to where Kent has already taken off walking toward the town.

He hasn’t said, exactly, what we’re supposed to say if anyone spots us. I’m fairly certain that a group of men and a single, gorgeous woman dressed in tactical gear showing up in their tiny town in the thick of night would raise some questions. But I guess that’s a problem we will deal with when we come to it, so we take off after him, resuming the previous formation.

“Safety off.” I tell Claire, giving her the exact opposite of every firearm safety guideline ever. “If you don’t feel safe, you shoot first and ask questions later. Got it?”

Next to me, Claire nods her understanding.

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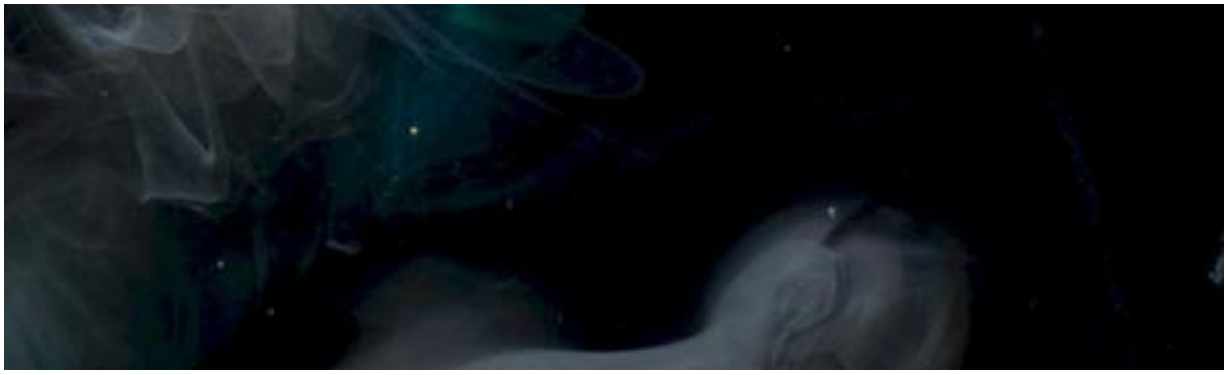

I’ve heard of one stop-light towns, but as we approach this one, I’m not sure whether they have any stoplights at all. This town is tiny, consisting of just a few buildings against the dark backdrop of mountains. It’s honestly unfathomable, and even weirder is to imagine that anything sinister is taking place here.

But as Kent navigates us to the town, I realize maybe it’s because what’s sinister isn’t actually *in* town at all. He leads us along the dirt path, past the little wooden sign welcoming us to town, and through.

The weirdest thing about walking through it is the quiet. It’s unsettling, but Remy’s arm brushing against mine grounds me. I’m not afraid of the people—I don’t blame anyone who would want to live in a place like this, removed from the shit that is the rest of the world.

But something about walking through a practical ghost town feels… wrong.

At some point, I realize where we’re going, even though Kent didn’t tell us exactly what he suspected. But he filled us in thoroughly on the town history—an old mining town where gold was once discovered. The mine’s closed now, but I suppose that doesn’t mean it’s entirely abandoned.

Really, though, could anybody live inside a mine? I have severe doubts about that, although I guess I don’t really know what mines look like. I have a feeling I’m about to find out.

There are a few lights on inside windows—including a neon ‘open’ sign inside the ‘trading post’ window and a beer sign lit up inside the inn.

“Shit’s creepy.” Michael grumbles, drawing closer. On my other side, Rook has his gun at the ready, his eyes taking in everything that there is to see, which isn’t a ton.

I don’t know whether the residents here are asleep or if they just stay indoors at night. Or maybe they just have the sense to stay away from us, because I certainly wouldn’t open the door to inquire about a group of strangers toting guns through town.

The ground slopes as Kent leads us downward, and I consciously keep my finger away from the trigger as I try to maintain my balance, suddenly grateful for the boots. Maybe Remy knew when it came down to it, he couldn’t leave me, even if it *was* the better option, which it isn’t.

The combined glow of all their lights illuminates the rock side, but I wouldn’t have noticed the former point of entry if Kent hadn’t drawn up to it. It’s barely bigger than him, an opening in the middle of the stone that is trimmed with wood beams and sealed with a thick plank of more wood.

I watch him examine the surface, running a hand over it looking for something. Whatever it is, he finds it, and then a moment later, pops the barrier open. It swings on hidden hinges, creaking open to expose a dark tunnel that makes my stomach clench.

A small part of me regrets this decision to come as I face the idea that this is where they’re headed. If I balk now, Remy will stay behind with me, and I’ll disappoint them all… not the least of which is Kent’s wife, who was stolen from him and erased without a single trace of her left. If she can face whatever horrors awaited her in this place alone, I can face it with these men at my back. And that’s exactly what we do.

The only hesitation comes from Michael, who sounds like he may throw up when he says, “We’re going in there?”

“Afraid of it collapsing?” Rook teases, brushing past him to shine his light ahead, illuminating a path for Kent.

“Or is it the small space you don’t like?” Rich joins in, smirking.

“No.” Michael swallows thickly, reaffirming my fear that he may toss his cookies out here. “It’s the mine spiders.”

“*Mine spiders*?” I hate how terrified my voice sounds when I repeat his words, and part of me wants to suggest that Michael and I can stand guard out here just so no one comes and seals us in there.

“He’s joking.” Remy assures me. He sounds confident in that, but when I catch Michael’s pale face, he shakes his head no.

Fucking mine spiders? I don’t know what that is, but anything with the word spider attached sounds awful in its own right. I suck in a steady breath through my nose, and then Remy ushers me ahead of him. “Remember what I said about shoot first, ask questions later?”

I nod, focusing on the back of Kent’s head rather than on the walls of rock closing us in. “Yeah, forget that. Safety on, and don’t shoot unless it’s necessary. We don’t want this thing collapsing on us.”

I nod again, because it’s all I can do with my mouth as dry as it is. All the possibilities of being in an abandoned mine hadn’t even occurred to me, but on top of the spiders and snakes and the humans that may be here, I have to worry about it *collapsing*?

Fuck. If it does, Rhea will lose us both.

“Here,” Remy says, his breath tickling the back of my neck and sending chills down my arms. I reach up without turning, worried if I take my eyes off Kent, we’ll lose him. Although, there don’t appear to be any other places for him to go. The mine is a straight path forward, lit only by our lights. The tracks are wide enough that so long as we stay in the center of them, they’re not a tripping hazard.

Remy places something heavy and cold in my hand, and when I look at it, I laugh. I don’t know why I do, because there’s not really anything funny about our situation. But the glossy cheetah print on the stainless pocketknife is so absurdly out of place, I can’t not giggle at it.

“Did Elaine tell you one was missing?”

“I found the cheetah print one in my guest house covered in blood and put two and two together. Personally, I like the zebra one, but…”

I stifle another laugh, testing the release for the blade and seeing that that too has a print on it… and a wicked edge. I switch it closed and store it in my pocket, grateful for a more familiar source of protection. I also switch the safety off of the revolver, idly wishing I had a holster for the thing. I’m not opposed to carrying a gun, but literally *carrying* it is kind of annoying.

His surprise gift served as a nice distraction from the fact that we’re walking constantly deeper into the dark, the cold getting more prominent. I’m not sure if that’s what has me shivering, or if it’s just the nature of where we are and what we’re doing.

Other than Michael’s stream of complaints—he’s cold, his feet hurt, it smells and when we get out of here, we should stop at the inn for a beer—

we’re quiet as we follow the tunnel… until Kent comes to a stop at a fork in the mine.

Michael bumps into Rook, who knocks into Remy, and I absurdly want to giggle as I think of the little dwarves from the cartoon I used to watch. There were seven of those, though, and only six of us. I stifle the sound, but not the grin, which seems to concern Remy, who watches me with suspicion for a moment.

I don’t know if the air is thin down here or if I’m just slap happy on the adrenaline, but it beats being scared, so I reign it in and focus my attention on Kent as he looks among us.

“We split up. Rich, Remy, and Claire to the left. Michael and Rook can come with me to the right.”

“Bad idea.” Remy shakes his head. “We stick together, and then we can backtrack.”

“This is my mission, Boudreaux.” Kent argues. “We may have already given away our presence. If we don’t split up and we choose the wrong path, then by the time we backtrack, we could lose our only advantage.”

“He’s right.” Rich says from somewhere over my shoulder. “We left the jet a good distance away, but if anyone saw the lights in the sky, I’m sure they’re already suspicious enough.”

I don’t bother to point out how nobody could have seen the lights if they were in the mine, considering we’re *underground*.

“And if we find something?” Remy challenges.

Rich holds out a radio with an antenna attached. I didn’t stop to think about what was in the bag he had strapped to his back, but I guess I know now.

“How old school.” Remy says drily. “Couldn’t find two tin cans and some string?”

“Cute.” Rich rolls his eyes, passing the other radio off to Rook.

There’s a moment while we all contemplate what we’re about to do… or maybe it’s just me. Kent nods toward the path he’s going to follow, and Rook obediently follows. Michael, on the other hand, hesitates just long enough to smirk at Remy. “Good luck Papa Bear.”

He winks, too, and then turns on his heel to run after the others, leaving Rich’s laugh to echo around us. “Guess that makes you Goldie Locks,” Rich grins at me. “Stay behind me and in front of Papa.”

“Fuck you.” Remy snaps as Rich turns around, chuckling to himself.

“Papa Bear?” I ask, needing to know more. I suddenly remember his confession—the one I never even acknowledged about his wife, his son. He had a *baby*.

Somehow, though they like to give each other a hard time, I can’t imagine the nickname has anything to do with that. And it doesn’t, because Remy sighs. “He’s a fucking idiot. Started calling me that on our first mission because I’m the one who gathered them all.”

“That’s cute.” I argue, unable to deny the smile on my face. “You created your own little family.”

“These assholes aren’t my family.”

Rich laughs this time, apparently disagreeing with that statement just as much as I do. “Sometimes you have to make your own family.”

“And sometimes you find your *real* family.” Remy fires back. There’s no heat in the statement, but I know exactly what point he’s getting at. I’ve been hiding from the truth about my family because I’m not ready to deal with it… not only a father, but a sister, too? Especially a sister who’s clearly been through her own shit. A sister who, for some weird ass reason, has aligned herself with *Wes*.

Rhea’s the only sister I need, and the only one I can focus on. We may have made up, but I need to call her when we get out of here and make sure everything really is good between us. Maybe it’s in my head, maybe she’s been busy with her exams, and I haven’t gotten a new phone since leaving my last on the airplane, and maybe I’ve just traded my dependency on her out with a dependency upon her brother.

Quiet falls between us as we push forward in our direction, and I’m not sure how long we’ve walked when we reach a dead end.

“Shit.” Rich mutters, running the beam of his light over the wall, like he may just find a crack for us to shimmy through. That might be my hard limit tonight, but thankfully, he doesn’t find anything. As he swings the beam down to rake his hands through his hair in frustration, I notice the glint of metal.

“Shine that back here.” I say, gesturing toward the rough surface to our left. He does, and Remy follows suit, illuminating the space I would swear I just saw something. I squint, tilt my head, take a step back…

But none of those things lead me to find the glint of silver again, until Rich shifts his light away.

“There!” I put my hand out to feel the surface… cold, solid. “There’s something here.”

“Let me at it.” Rich says, so I do. He takes my place, running his hand over the space, and then he finds a trigger point. There’s a sudden release of pressure that for half a second, I think means the mine is coming down around us, and then the wall swings open.

“Christ.” He mutters. “What the fuck kind of psychopaths are we dealing with? This shit is next level.”

“People with a lot of money.” Remy guesses, shining his light into the darkness they just unlocked. It does nothing to illuminate anything, so Rich steps forward, shining his own light in.

I follow tentatively, Remy close behind. The temperature is different… the smell, too.

“We found something.” Remy radios at my back. When he presses the button, there’s a moment of static feedback, and then silence.

Rich moves slowly forward, his light doing little to make a difference, while Remy tries again to radio back to the rest of our crew. I’m just starting to get anxious about them not responding when Rich lets out what I can only describe as a yelp. It’s short and high-pitched and sets the most furious things loose in my imagination, but when Remy shines the light at him, he isn’t being eaten by a zombie or anything… although the bottom half of him seems to have disappeared.

“What the fuck?” Remy rushes to offer him a hand, but Rich shakes his head.

“I missed the drop. There are stairs…” He points below him, and we peer forward to see him.

“Stairs?” It sounds like a bad idea. Stairs leading deeper underground? Why would anyone walk willingly into hell’s gates?

But then I realize, that’s exactly what we’re doing… exactly what they’ve been doing these last six months that Remy and I have been apart. He’s been walking into the fire to attempt to save people from their sentences, and it’s the most noble thing I can imagine, but I fucking hate it.

“Yup.” Rich nods. “A lot of them.”

‘A lot of them’ ended up being sixteen—I count them on the way down. The staircase is wide despite the space above being cramped, so I stick to one side of it without running my hands along it lest I encounter one of those damn spiders Michael mentioned.

When we reach the bottom, there's a little click, and it takes approximately two seconds before a light blooms on over our heads. I look up to see the fluorescent bars, which look woefully out of place.

But for the first time since we left the jet, we can see our surroundings in their entirety. We're in an expansive space, which is decidedly not the mine —the walls here are smooth steel, grey and depressing and creepy as hell.

"Where the fuck are we?" Rich asks, turning around to take it all in.

"A bunker." Remy answers, without hesitation, his eyes sweeping the space for something.

"A *bunker*?" I've heard the term somewhere, but I can't place what exactly it is… or what it means for us.

"Like a fallout shelter."

The new voice makes me jump, and as I turn to look for the source, I sigh a heavy breath of relief.

"Fuck. Kent?"

Behind him, I see Michael and Rook, both looking around as they try to assess the place.

"Both routes led here?" Rich asks, skeptical.

"Apparently. I could tell we were headed underground, but we just followed a single path the whole way here."

"If it's a shelter, why is it empty?" Michael asks.

"Because the real shelter is on the other side." Remy says, nodding at the expanse of steel opposite the stairs.

"How do you know this?" Rook asks, dubious.

That gets a laugh out of Remy, who shakes his head. "There are three things wealthy men are obsessed with."

"Hot women?" Michael guesses.

"Power." Rich nods.

"And the preservation of themselves above all else." Kent surmises, earning a solemn nod from Remy.

"Humans are obsessed with survival… particularly of the elite." He looks like he's tasted something rotten, but he continues. "Nuclear fallout shelters seemed like the only answer during war times, but if you're rich enough, you're always at war."

"We breed our soldiers." It's supposed to be a thought, but it comes off my tongue instead, and Remy looks at me, startled. But he nods all the same.

I want to give him a hug, because the look on his face is so sad, so broken that I regret letting it slip. But Michael asks, “So how do we get in?” and that’s enough to snap him out of whatever nasty memory he’s lingering in.

“You don’t.” Kent guesses, glancing at Remy for confirmation. “That’s the whole point of fallout shelter. To keep you safe in the event of nuclear fallout.”

“So, you’re telling me you can’t get in or out?” Michael asks. “That makes no sense.”

“You can get out.” Remy says, working hard to avoid Kent’s gaze. His eyes find mine, instead. “But you can’t get in.”

“Someone has to let us in?” Rich cocks his head, looking for any sort of door to knock upon.

“So… we’re done?” Rook shakes his head, trying to grasp what this means for us. “This is the end of the line?”

“We’re sitting ducks right now.” Remy swivels his head and finds whatever he’s looking for. He tips his head, very subtly, behind him. My eyes and Kent’s follow the path to the camera blinking in the corner.

I have to swallow to abate the swell of nausea inside of me as the sudden realization of the red light takes me back to Evan Ludlow’s basement.

“If someone was on the other side, they’d have shot us by now.” Rich reasons, though he doesn’t sound entirely confident about that.

“Not necessarily. They’d have to open the door to do it. It’s not worth the risk when they can wait us out.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I steal a glance at Kent, who’s hung his head and pressed his hand firmly over his mouth. I don’t know if he’s holding back vomit or a scream or maybe tears, but it’s one of the most devastating things I’ve ever seen. The desperation hits me as surely as if it were my own, a wicked, cold feeling.

“We didn’t come this far to turn away.” I shake my head.

“We can’t do anything.” Remy counters softly. His eyes are still on Kent, afraid to say what he really means.

We can’t get to her. If she’s in there, she’s out of reach.

I scan the space for anything to throw, unwilling to give up my boot, since I’ll definitely need that later. I stride toward Rich, taking the radio that’s hanging limp in his hand, and before anybody can object, I throw it.

My aim is a lot better when I’m not tied up, it seems, and the heavy radio makes impact right away, knocking the camera angle just a bit. I’m already

running to pick it up when Remy catches me around the arm, stopping me in my tracks.

“What are you doing?” His voice is a hiss, startled, and by the way he’s looking at me, I think he’s fearing for my sanity.

“If we can’t get in, we have to make someone come out.” I try to tug out of his arm, thinking he’ll understand where I was going with this, but he holds tight, his brow furrowing.

“And you think breaking the camera is going to make them come out to investigate?”

I can hear the doubt in his voice, and I can see the doubt on Rich’s face, but I just nod. “That’s how I got out of Ludlow’s basement. I tripped the fire alarm, trying to get the camera. He came back to check on me.”

“Jesus.” He closes his eyes, processing the information I haven’t given him. We haven’t discussed any of what happened down there, and I’m grateful that he hasn’t felt the need to demand every detail. I’m grateful that whatever may have happened hasn’t made a difference in how he feels about me.

Movement over his shoulder catches my eye, and I see Kent standing with the radio in hand, appraising it thoughtfully.

“She’s right.” He says, glancing toward me. “But we have something you didn’t have in the basement.”

“Which is what?” Michael asks, looking between all of us like he hasn’t yet figured out what’s going on.

“Guns.”

The word has barely even left Kent’s mouth when he points his toward the camera. Rich and Rook rush at him, but they aren’t fast enough. He pulls the trigger, and a second later, as Remy whips me out of the way, shards of thick black glass rain down around him.

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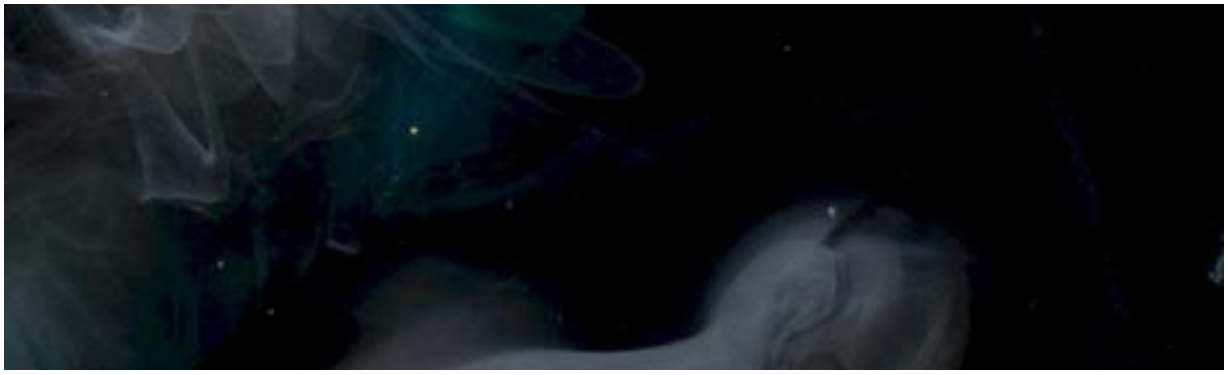

If he doesn’t seal us in here to fucking suffocate to death, I am absolutely going to murder him.

The steel of the bunker may be reinforced, but the area over the steps where the rock transitions is not. If he’d shot just a little further to the right, we’d be swimming in rock right now. Never mind the fact that he’s a fucking sniper and wouldn’t miss unless it was on purpose. It’s a stupid chance to take.

“What the fuck?” I growl, turning to him once I’ve checked that Claire wasn’t struck by a piece of the camera lens. “Reckless motherfucker! You could have trapped us down here.”

“I don’t miss.” Kent snaps. “Now get into formation.”

I stare at him, not sure exactly which formation he’s referring to since there’s nowhere to go. But apparently, he wants the usual, so I take up at his side, the two of us forming a barrier shoulder-to-shoulder. I ensure that Claire is firmly behind me, Michael and Rich out at the sides. I don’t see a door, or even a seam in the steel wall, so I’m guessing that wherever the entrance is, it retracts into the roof.

“Get in the back.” Kent demands, turning to glance at me. “Switch with Rook.”

“What?” I sneer. “No. Fuck no.”

“You don’t have a vest, you beautiful fucking idiot.” Rich says. “If the door opens and they open fire, you don’t even have a *chance* to protect your girl. Back of the line.”

I laugh despite not being the least bit amused, and switch places with Rook. He's big enough, at least, that his body shields more of Claire, who reaches a hand back behind her. I grab it, giving her a gentle squeeze.

Not being in front of her makes my entire body tense, and I wonder how hard her heart is pounding right now. She doesn't turn to look at me, doesn't waver, but this is different from anything she's ever done. This is a different type of danger… one that's well-past stupid. We have no clue how many people are in the shelter. We could be outnumbered a hundred to one. It's impossible to say how big the shelter may be, though no matter how large it is, I'm sure it doesn't hold more than a thousand. You can't gather that many people in one space without expecting trouble, no matter how well-regulated conditions are. Any businessman or politician worth their weight in shit knows that.

"Old rules apply," I tell Claire. "Safety off."

She nods, and I realize she's already done it. "Shoot first?"

I don't know how to answer that, because I don't know who or what is on the other side. But Kent doesn't hesitate the way I do. "Yes."

Claire nods again, though he can't see her. Next to her, Michael rolls his shoulders anxiously, Rich scans the space as if someone may appear behind us, and I drop Claire's hand to position the scope of my rifle in the space between Rook and Kent's heads. I want so badly to tell Claire to run rather than let her stand here, in the middle of what could very well turn out to be a shoot-out, but the truth is, she's safer here right now.

"Head down." I warn her, wishing suddenly that we had full uniforms so I could have put a helmet on her.

Claire nods, tipping her head down.

And then we wait.

And we wait.

"What if there's no one in there?" Michael asks, after what feels like an eternity of silence.

"They are." Rich says calmly. "And they're going to break before we do, because once you rely on something like a camera to monitor a space, you need to know what's going on in there when the camera goes out."

"Any minute now." Kent warns.

They're right, it turns out. And so was I, because a few moments later, there's a rumbling sound that seems to shake the space over our heads. I hear rocks falling loose above us and hope there's more than one way out of

this bunker in case the mine shaft fails. The wall retracts slowly, rolling up inch by inch, but Kent holds his fist up, telling us to wait to fire until he gives us the all-clear.

Shots don't immediately come from the other side, so as it peels back, revealing more of the space beyond it, we stand at the ready, my finger poised over the trigger, ready to lay it all on the line if that's what it comes to.

But the shots still don't come, and the feet on the ground don't belong to men. They're small, bare. And as the door reveals more and more, we realize all together, that they're *children*.

"The fuck?" Michael growls, at the same time Claire gasps.

Kent stays stock-still, clearly as shocked as the rest of us.

There's about twenty of them, in varying heights, boys and girls dressed in innocuous pajamas, some holding teddy bears or blankets. Most of them look like they were pulled from sleep, blinking tired and confused eyes at us, but a few of the older ones are wide-eyed, watching us with shock or fear.

Movement over the shoulder of one of the shorter ones catches my attention, and I look up to see the man stationed behind them with the gun in his hand turned sideways. I don't have to look long to know he has no idea how to shoot the thing, and though Kent's fist is in the air, commanding us to hold fire, I see the fat finger of the man shaking against the trigger.

And I see his barrel—not aimed at one of us, not at a threat, but at the back of a small girl's head.

I squeeze the trigger, dropping him in a single instant, though not without creating chaos. The screams of the children echo around the walls as Kent yells for us to hold our fire. The kids turn into a mass of bodies, running in all opposite directions—a few drop to the ground in front of us, covering their heads with their hands, while others run deeper into the shelter.

Claire is the first to gather her wits—or the first to do something incredibly stupid. She breaks out from in front of me, darting past Michael before he has a chance to stop her, and pushes past Kent, who is focused on guiding us forward.

I hear another shot somewhere, though I have no idea where it comes from, and panic fills my lungs instead of oxygen as I move to the last spot I saw her before Claire dropped. The others push forward, sweeping the room

for the source of the shot, but I can't focus on anything with adrenaline flooding my veins and blurring my vision, panic dropping me to my knees, where I find her cradling a child against her chest, whispering something I can't hear over the blood pounding in my ears.

Once I make sure she's safe, I command her to stay down, and she doesn't argue. I'm not even sure she heard me, she's so engrossed in comforting the small form against her chest. Another moves toward her, seeking the same comfort, so I rise and look around the space.

It's vast—like a giant studio apartment, with an industrial kitchen tucked in one corner and a massive couch in another. Despite the fact that it is still glaringly a bunker, it's bright and clean, with a richly dyed rug covering the floor where the man I shot is laying in his own blood.

Rich, with his fingers on the side of the guy's neck, shakes his head, assuring us that he's dead. Kent's already taken off in one direction without anyone at his back, and Rook goes the other way. As Rich gets to his feet, his eyes catch mine. I expect accusation, anger, but he bites his lip so hard it draws blood.

"What the fuck is this?"

I don't know, and we don't have time to figure it out. We've got to sweep the place.

"Keep your eyes out." I tell Michael, nodding at Claire, who's now got a child in each arm, and another wrapping its little arms around her neck. "Anything happens to her, and I'll slit your fucking throat before you can say sorry."

Michael only nods his understanding, but despite the shit I give him, he's still by my side for a reason. Michael is capable, and he'd rather slit his own throat than intentionally let me down, which gives me the resolve I need to follow down the hall Kent disappeared into.

The corridor is long but lit enough by the lights overhead that I can see there are approximately ten doors on each side… at least. It's going to take some time to clear this place, so I run to catch up to him. I double-check the rooms he's already passed—they're comfortably accommodated, but relatively bare, with no closets. It makes quick work of clearing the first few rooms, and then as I catch up to him, I spot the hair poking out from under a bed.

There isn't time to coax him out, so I just drop down so that he can see my face, and hopefully the sincerity, when I tell him, "We aren't here to

hurt you.”

I don’t stick around to see if he tries to say anything, running to the next, repeating the process. There’s an older boy—maybe twelve—standing in front of two girls in one of the rooms with his arms out protectively.

“There’s a woman out there.” I tell them. “She’ll take care of you. You can trust her.”

It’s as I’m checking the last room, opposite Kent in this thankfully empty hall, when I hear his sob. I’m at his side in seconds, gun at the ready, but he’s dropped his at his side.

Standing against the wall with her hands over her face, is a woman. Her hands obscure most of her features, but I can tell she’s an adult, and by the way Kent’s staring at her like he’s seeing a ghost, I’m guessing this is the woman we’re here for.

“Libby?” His voice breaks after her name, and he dissolves into tears as he steps toward her.

Dressed in a nightgown, there’s nowhere for a weapon, but I don’t trust her implicitly, so I train my scope on her head as Kent gets closer, unable to ignore the sudden twist in my gut. I feel the strangest sense of déjà vu and realize this must be how he felt when I was chasing who I thought was Claire up the steps.

“Libs,” he tries again, drawing up in front of her.

I watch as her hands slip an inch, allowing her to see him, and allowing me to see the tears streaking her face.

“It’s okay,” Kent promises, holding a hand out for her to take. But she doesn’t move… not when he steps in front of her, not when he places a tentative hand on her shoulder, and not even when he grabs her in his arms and holds her so tight that I wonder if he’s trying to keep her from breaking, or himself.

I want to allow him this moment, and I want to allow her a chance to acclimate to her husband, but we don’t know what the fuck is going on here. “We gotta go.”

Kent nods, tucking her under his arm without a second of hesitation and leading her to the door. She doesn’t look up as she passes, but my gut twists again as they brush by me, and I get the sense that danger is near.

A little girl comes running full-speed at them, attaching herself to Libby’s calves, but even that doesn’t make her look up. Desperation hangs in the air,

which has decidedly calmed down since the initial shot, and Rich sprints toward them, mouth open in shock. “You got her?”

“Come here,” Rook says softly, taking the hand of the small girl and pulling her off of Kent’s wife, who she still reaches for.

“The place is clear, other than them.” Rich nods at the children, most of which are sticking to the walls, keeping a safe distance away from us, watching with curious, and scared eyes. “What do we do?”

What do we do?

I have no fucking clue. I don’t know how many of them there are, but I know it’s more than the jet can accommodate, even if all of the adults stayed behind and I simply told Simon to take them somewhere. Even if the jet would fit them all, where the hell do we go? I don’t know who these kids are—they look too clean and wellcared for to be captives, and the fact that Libby over there isn’t interacting with them makes me wonder why the fuck she’s here.

I scrub a hand over my face, wishing Kent was capable of rational thought right now. None of us know the first thing about children… the closest we can get is that we all were one, at some point.

Rook’s eyes meet mine over the shoulder of the girl he picked up, desperate for a command. But I have none to give. It’s Claire who breaks the drone of sniffling and whispering.

“They brought these kids here somehow. There’s got to be a car or something.”

“A car?” Michael repeats. “A car isn’t going to fit them all.”

“We’ll have to take trips.”

“It’s three hours by car to a town with more. There’s not enough room on the jet.” I work through my thoughts as I speak them. “Even if we have *multiple* cars, I don’t think we have enough space. I don’t know how to get to the next town. Kent?”

Kent turns to take me in, as if he forgot I was even here. And then he nods, turning to his wife.

“Do you know a way out of here?”

Libby’s nod is quick, but she seems to pull herself together enough to lead him out the way we came. Something uneasy flickers at the base of my consciousness, but I can’t pinpoint what the source is. We’re in an underground bunker in a remote part of the country with children who were

clearly brought here so that they could be sold. Everything about it feels wrong.

“Stay with the children and her.” I tell Rook and Rich, whose arms are crossed nervously over his chest as though he’s scared one of them might come bite him. And to be fair, they might. There’s a few on the smaller side, the ones in Claire’s arms, who very much look like they could still be cutting teeth.

“If anyone shows up who isn’t one of us, take them out.”

They both nod, and Michael joins my side.

“Something feels off.” I tell him, earning a grunt of agreement.

“I don’t like it.” He says. “One man and woman—a missing woman—and twenty kids? This isn’t an orphanage.”

I don’t tell him that I think that may be exactly what this is. An orphanage isn’t the word I’d use, but I suspect it’s something of the sort. I’ve barely even gotten a look at these kids, but I can tell they’re different races, ages. They have no more in common with each other than being children. I’m fairly certain they’re all stolen, but I don’t dare say that out loud.

I press a kiss on Claire’s forehead as I pass her, and Kent and Libby stop just inside to wait for us. I see Libby fall to her knees, and Kent drops down to console her. I don’t even know what to say to Claire when her eyes meet mine—they’re so full of so many things that neither of us can put into words.

We’ve seen horrors—endured things no one should—but using a bunch of kids as a line of defense must take the cake for the most despicable thing either of us have witnessed. I see the tears in her eyes, buried behind stubborn resolve, and she doesn’t need words to let me know exactly what she’s thinking.

She won’t abandon them. And neither will I.

“I know.” I assure her. “We’ll make this right.”

She only nods as one of the toddlers burrows deeper against her, trying to get closer despite the bulk of the vest.

“I love you.” She tells me. And it’s enough to encompass all the other things that don’t need said.

“I love you too.” I kiss her lips this time as she tilts her head back for me, and then I let her go to follow Kent and Libby, my gun still at the ready… just in case.

They turn right, the way Kent came, and I follow them with Michael at my side, our lights illuminating the space for them. Something still nags at the base of my skull, but I put it down to the fact that we just stumbled into a hellhole. Regardless of how good those kids looked, there's no saying how long they've been there, where they came from, what's happened to them. And I'm sure whatever potential trauma they've got, me shooting a gun over their heads and killing the adult with them didn't help.

"This is sick." Michael whispers, leaning toward me as we follow the ground until we come out at the fork, where they lead us forward through the uncomfortable tightness of the mine shaft. Each step we take away from Claire makes my heart pound harder, and my palms are sweaty on the trigger that I ghost my fingers over.

When we step out into the night air, my nerves ease a little, though not enough to discount the fact that everything about this space has seemed off.

Libby leads Kent, and subsequently us, around the canyon, to an alcove we didn't pass by when we first came down here. The shadows divide as we turn our lights into the space, and then Libby steps aside so that we can see the tour bus parked in the nook.

It's massive—the kind you can fit dozens of tourists on. As the light glances over the faded letters peeling on the side, I see 'Canyon Caravan' printed on the side.

"Can you drive this thing?" Michael asks, sounding reasonably doubtful.

Driving a fucking tour bus is not something I've done—it isn't even on my bucket list, but it can't be too hard as long as we don't have to back up… like to pull it out of the space it's parked in.

"You have keys?" I turn to Libby, suspicious. I didn't see her pick anything up on the way out, a fact that's just now occurred to me.

Michael glances at me, realizing the same thing I just did, and then turns to sweep the space behind us, making sure no one is sneaking up on us.

"They're inside," she says, gesturing to the door.

I don't bother asking how she knows, or why if they've been there the whole time, she's never made an escape. I know Stockholm syndrome is a thing, and I'm giving her the benefit of the doubt.

The doors open easily, a wave of hot, musty air hitting me in the face as I part them and step inside. True to her word, the keys are there… sitting on the driver's seat that looks to be covered in nineties bowling alley carpet. I turn the scope of the flashlight, letting it bounce around the empty bus.

I realize, a moment too late, that it’s not empty.

The sting in my shoulder immediately steals my breath, and I stumble backwards, the door lever catching me in the back.

There’s another shot somewhere, and everything in my body tries to pull itself together, tries to get me to my feet so that I can get back to her.

I make it up on one foot before losing my balance and toppling forward.

They say your life flashes before your eyes when you die, and maybe there’s something to that saying. Because she is my entire life at this point, and as I lay on the filthy ground, my blood pooling around me, I swear, all I see is her.

That alone is enough to take the pain away.

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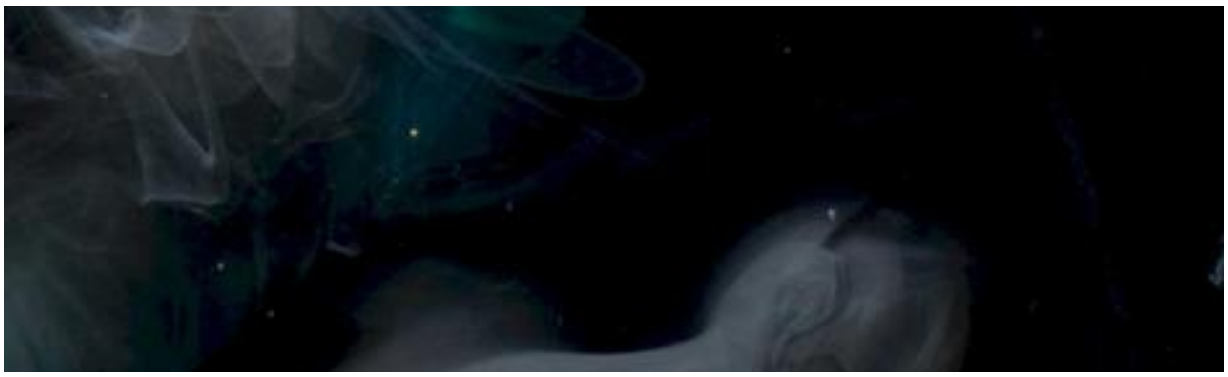

I’ve been mentally preparing myself for things to get worse. Every time I see something barbaric—being auctioned online, meeting my buyer, hearing just a portion of the cruelty that Taissa and the others faced in their captivity—I think it probably can’t get worse. And each time, I’m wrong. Because there are about twenty children here, and even though they seem unharmed and cared for, I have zero doubt in my mind that they are stolen, the way I was. Maybe they weren’t all ripped straight from the womb, but they were ripped from their homes, their families, and that somehow hurts so much worse than knowing it happened to me. I see my childhood in each one of them, and that fucking hurts.

No kid deserves to go through what I did. I didn’t deserve to go through what I did. I’m not going to let them suffer.

“Rook…” My voice shakes over his name, so I clear my throat and force my voice to stabilize. “Maybe we can… clean up this mess?”

His eyes follow mine to the mess in question. The body lying on the ground. It was a clean hit, although I’m not entirely sure whose gun it came from. They got him right between the eyes, but it has somehow not created a ton of splatter, which I am immeasurably grateful for.

Rich jumps into action, like he hadn’t even thought that the sight may be distressing to the children. He ducks into a hall, then reappears with a set of bed sheets—the first of which he throws on the body before he and Rook lift it to take him out of the room, the second which he tosses over the crimson stain on the floor.

I’m rocking back and forth, my arms full of children, but around me, there are more of them with tear-streaked faces or fear in their eyes. I catch the gaze of a girl, maybe a young teenager, and manage a smile for her.

“You look like my mom.” She says thoughtfully, as if she has to explain why she’s staring at me. “She had yellow hair, too.”

“Where is your mom?” I ask, desperately latching onto the little bit of information. I have no idea how to reunite these kids with their families, but the older ones will at least remember things about their lives—addresses, phone numbers, family names.

The girl swallows. “Dead. They killed her when they took me.”

Pain lances my chest at her words, but I try not to let it show. I’m trying to act the way an adult should— the way kids think adults feel all the time. But I’m not calm, nor am I composed. Inside of me, everything is spinning in a vortex. It’s chaos, and not the kind that I enjoy. “Who took you? That man? The woman?”

“No.” The girl shakes her head, coming closer to me. “I don’t know who they were. Dirty men. They— they stank, and they had dirt under their nails. They shot her and took me and put me back on the bus and brought me here.”

Her eyes water, but she looks like she’s trying hard not to let any emotion show as she blinks the tears away.

“A bus brought you here?”

The girl nods, as the little boy in my arms burrows deeper against me, trying to slip under the Kevlar vest Remy made me wear. I’d take it off if I didn’t have to move the children to do so.

“The bus brings new kids. That one—” She nods at the girl whose fingers are wrapped in my hair. “She just got here today.”

I swallow, the feeling of something bad percolating in my gut.

She just got here today.

“Where’s the bus? How do they bring you in here?”

“Over there.” She gestures to the expanse of wall opposite where we came in.

Rook’s gaze collides with mine, and then he turns to see the space the girl indicated. There’s nothing there… no door, no window. But then, there didn’t seem to be a door when we’d stood on the other side of it, either.

“Can you show my friends?” I ask her, indicating Rich and Rook. “We just want to get you guys back to your families, okay? Nobody here will

hurt you, I promise."

She stares at me a moment, and then nods before turning with the guys in tow. It's almost a funny sight, such large and tattooed men following such a small girl. But there's no humor in this situation, so I focus my attention on calming the keening wails of the children clinging to me.

"Shh." I soothe, brushing my hands over hair and pressing kisses to little heads. My leg is losing feeling beneath the combined weight of my own body and the kids clinging to me like a life raft, but I don't dare move.

The little girl in my arms may be the youngest of the children here—she's barely even a kid, more of a toddler, but somehow my rocking and shooshing seem to soothe her. She's just settled against me, her tiny fist unclenching and letting the pain in my scalp ease, when I hear the gunshot.

It's unmistakable, even though it comes from a distance. It's muffled, but that does nothing to abate the sudden lurch in my chest. If it wasn't for the little bodies pressed against mine, I'd think I was shot through the heart, causing it to plummet into my stomach.

Someone rushes at me, stealing the baby from my arms, and I can't even fight them. It doesn't occur to me to do it. Instinct guides my motions more than any sort of thought, and another older child comes to gather the others from me as I rise to my feet.

One of my legs is numb, dropping beneath me as I stand, but I catch myself and limp toward Rich and Rook, who are standing on the opposite side of the room. Pins and needles tingle along my leg as I go, feeling returning slowly. When the second shot rings out, some of the haze that's wrapped around me disappears, and I move faster toward them as the wall begins to rise, exactly as it did the first time.

Rich and Rook push the girl behind them, give some kind of command and ready their guns as the wall rises. I realize my gun isn't in my hands and spin, trying to be sure none of the kids grabbed it. When did I drop it?

My heart squeezes in my chest as I remember letting it fall from my hands so that I could provide comfort to the little ones. I also remember Kent's wife falling to her knees in tears, grief-stricken. I hadn't understood why, but I hadn't had a chance to contemplate it.

I know in my gut that something is wrong, and my head swirls with the possibility that Libby led them straight into a trap. Why else would she take them out the way we came in if she wasn't hiding anything? Could she

really be sneaky enough to grab the gun right there in the middle of everyone?

I know the answer, of course. Everything has been chaos from the first shot that fired, taking out the man on their side. And it's only worsened with the shot that rang out mere moments ago, the children jumping into action as if they've prepared for a moment like this.

I have one moment of clarity despite the fear that's dulled my senses. "Go!" I tell the girl who opened the door, her eyes wide and her hands trembling around the tablet in her hands. As I yell again, she sets it on the countertop and repeats my order to the others.

They move quickly, running down the hall. The older ones scoop up the younger to carry them as the sound of more gunfire ricochets around the walls. Bile rises in my throat, but as the last of the kids runs into the hall, I make the choice to throw myself in front of it, splaying my arms and legs to create a barrier. I have no weapon for a shoot-out, but I can stop anyone from getting to the children.

My hands shake around the cheetah print pocketknife Remy gave me as I pull it out and switch the blade, holding it at the ready. I have no idea who is on the other side of the slowly rising wall, or how many of them there are, but I won't let them hurt these kids. I can't.

Rich shoots first, ducking low and slipping under the wall so that he can get out to the action. Rook follows right behind him, and as the rest of the hidden entrance retracts, the light from inside the bunker spills out into the darkness, allowing me to see little bits of what lies on the other side.

The most obvious of those things is the bus—a big tour bus, facing right into the bunker. It's coated in dust, maybe even so much that it doesn't run anymore. And yet, the red liquid that drips from the open doors is an ominous sight.

There's another gunshot, a scream, and then rapid fire.

Everyone's moving too fast for me to see any identifying features, and then someone stumbles into the kitchen, blood running down their neck. When I trail my eyes up, looking for the source, I see the space where their ear should be has been blown away. It's none of the men I know, none of the ones I came here with.

He staggers toward me, in what I can only assume is a state of shock. He doesn't lift his gun as he goes; he just moves toward me like he's been

compelled to, so I ready the knife, adjusting my grip. His lips move like his feet—automatically, awkwardly. No sound comes out.

I'm just about to stab him in the neck when he grips me by the vest and uses the leverage to pull himself closer, knocking me from my feet. A bullet whizzes just past my cheek and lodges itself somewhere in the man's neck, But he doesn't let go yet, so I drive the blade into the same spot, pull it out, and do it again and again until he goes limp, falling away from me.

Rook pulls me to my feet in the next instant, and then delivers another shot to the back of the man's skull just in case. He certainly looked like a zombie in his final moments, so perhaps a double tap is a smart choice.

I scan the space behind him, the bodies lying on the ground before the bus. Kent's on his knees, screaming, while Michael tries to pull him away from the body in his arms… his wife.

My eyes rove over the space, seeking out Rich or Remy. He was with the others when he left, so where is he?

I stagger past Rook, looking for either of the other two. When I step into the night, I see Rich, just as he drops to his knees on the floor of the bus. My eyes flick back to the red dripping down the steps, and understanding takes hold of me deep inside, threatening to turn me inside out.

The world tunnels around me, everything getting darker in the periphery as I run toward that bus, toward the man that I know is on it.

I think I hear someone call my name as I run past Kent, but I don't stop, slipping in the blood that's collected on the ground. I nearly go careening into it, but I grip the handrail, which is good because my legs give out the minute I see it… the minute I see *him*.

I open my mouth, and what comes out can't even be described as a scream. It's more of my every hope dying a violent death all at once. Rich's eyes connect with mine, and the look there would have taken me to my knees if Rook hadn't already grabbed me around the waist, dragging me away from the mess… from Remy, where he lies in a pool of blood.

All bets are off, then. I fight him as easily as if he were one of the attackers, throwing my elbow back to try and catch him in the face, desperately wriggling to try and free myself from his grip.

All around me, I hear voices. They tangle together, each one indistinguishable from the next.

All I know is that none of them are Remy's, because he's lying face down in his own blood.

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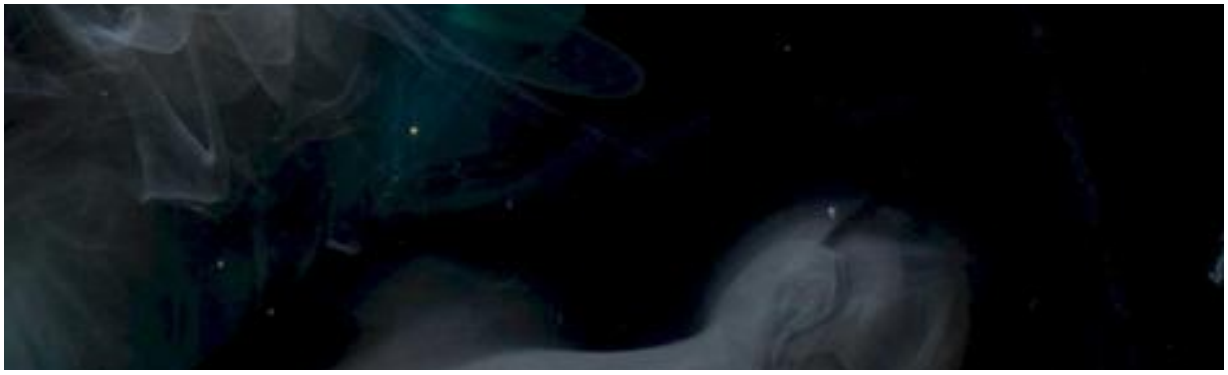

The world blurs around me as Kent pulls himself together and begins dishing out commands, none of which I hear. In the end, Rich and Rook go back to tend to the children. When he releases me, I scramble up the steps to where Remy lays, feeling through the blood for a sign of life.

I find it in his pulse, thrumming weakly in his wrist, and squeeze his hand as a sob escapes me.

“Help him!” I beg, glancing up at Michael, who’s already pressing his hands against one of the wounds as Kent drops behind the steering wheel.

Rich has already flipped him onto his back, and as Kent backs the bus into the night, the moonlight lets me see the spots where his shirt tore on impact. Guilt claws its way through me—the first bullet landed somewhere in his shoulder—dangerously close to his heart. The second looks like it nicked him in the side of his torso. If he’d had the vest on, if I had stayed on the plane the way he wanted me to…

“Put pressure on this one, Claire.” Michael instructs me, indicating the one on his stomach.

My fingers are clumsy over the fasteners of the vest, but I let it fall to the floor and strip my tank top over my head, balling the fabric up and passing it to Michael, before I take over for him. This one isn’t bleeding as heavily, so I press the heel of my palm against it the second Michael lifts his blood-covered hands away to tend the one at his shoulder, pressing my shirt against it.

“This is too much blood.” He mutters as the red spreads over the fabric, and I think it was supposed to be an internal thought, because when my eyes glance to his, he looks apologetic.

“He’s fine.” I say, my voice desperate as Kent guides the bus through rocky ground, bouncing us around violently. Remy’s head rolls, so I smooth my hand through his hair, ignoring the blood that’s already getting tacky and cold on my fingers. “He’ll be fine. Simon will get us to a hospital, and —”

“The bus can’t make it back the way we came. We can’t get to the plane, Claire.”

“I—” I open my mouth and close it, not sure exactly what he’s telling me. “Then Kent can—”

“It’s a three hour drive to the next town. He doesn’t have that long.”

My eyes burn—everything burns, but I force it down. “He’ll be fine. I don’t think it got any major organs and—”

He doesn’t tell me that it’s the blood loss he’s worried about. He’s opening his mouth to say something, but I cut him off. “He’ll be fine.”

He has to be.

Michael nods slowly, turning to look out at the empty canyon stretching out around us. We’re so small in the vast space, just a little blip on the radar, and yet I feel like my world is glass, balancing on the tip of a blade. One wrong move, and it all shatters.

“You promised me,” I say, accusation and hysteria warring in my vocal chords. “You promised me, Remy, that you wouldn’t leave me alone in the dark. Don’t you dare fucking leave me.”

Michael avoids my eyes, which is just as well, because I press myself against Remy and just continue to talk to him, pleading, begging.

When Kent stops the bus, Michael looks confused.

“Move.” Kent orders, and I do, giving him the space he needs to drop down and assess the wounds. “Get her off the bus.”

The second command is for Michael, who looks over at me, then back to Kent, waiting for further instruction.

“Get her off!” He repeats, glaring at the two of us. “Now!”

He’s pissed, and I can’t blame him. Remy is his friend, and despite whatever tension there has been between them lately, they’re close. And now Remy’s been shot—because I was wearing the vest that was meant for him.

“No!” I beg, trying to fight Michael off before his arms even close around me. But he’s stronger, and I’m covered in blood, so when he gets his hands on me, I can’t pry them off.

I throw my arms out, trying to grab hold of anything that will keep me from being separated from him. I imagine that the minute he gets me on the ground, they’re going to shut the door and take off, but instead, Michael keeps hold of me. His arms act as an anchor, weighing me down as a small light blooms inside the bus, and especially when I hear Remy’s scream.

It’s a sound that fills me simultaneously with hope and terror. The scream means he’s alive, he’s awake. But it’s clear he’s in agony.

Tears are flooding my face as I try to renew my fight, thrashing every which way to get out from under Michael’s grip, but he’s loyal to whoever calls the shots. Kent told him to get me off the bus, and he keeps me off of it even as I scream out for Remy, to tell him that I’m here, that it will be okay. I manage to deliver a sharp kick in the balls, and Michael lets go of me as he collapses forward to try and ease his own pain. But just as I’m darting up the steps, Kent and Remy fill the space.

His eyes are rolling, his face covered in a sheen of sweat, and Kent is supporting most of his weight with Remy’s arm around his neck. I scramble backwards, giving them the space to get down. The smell of burning flesh sizzles through the air, and I realize he removed Remy’s shirt. The burn marks on his chest are angry and shiny under the moonlight.

“Clean the bus up and get the kids on it.” Kent commands. “Rich will drive.”

My heart thrums faster as I look all around us. Michael nods, pushing up the steps.

“You’re with him,” Kent grunts, pushing past me.

“No.” I follow him, taking Remy’s other arm. He’s far taller than me, and I don’t think I succeed in helping take much of the burden off of Kent, but it illustrates my point. “I’m not leaving him.”

“You’re going to slow me down and cost him his life.” Kent growls. “Go with Michael. Help the children.”

The children.

“No. There’s three of them, they can handle the kids. I can’t leave him. I won’t.”

“I have to get him on the bike with me.” Kent huffs. I hadn’t even realized we’re nearly where we left the bikes, but now that I look back at

where Michael is waiting on the bus, it makes sense. It's a steep incline—we wouldn't have made it up in the bus. No way a vehicle that big could have climbed up the rocky terrain. "And you can't drive the bike, so…" He grits his teeth as we push higher. My legs burn, and Remy's weight feels heavier than usual.

"I can do it." I never even learned how to ride a bicycle, something that seemed so irrelevant until now. But it doesn't matter. I watched Remy's every move when I sat behind him. I can do this. I will.

"If you crash, I can't stop and help you." Kent lets out another growl as we reach the even ground, where the bikes wait for us. I hear his heavy breaths as I move in time with him.

"I wouldn't want you to." I tell him, helping him ease Remy over the front of the bike. His eyes meet with mine for one moment, and then he nods, as if he had any say. I scramble to the next bike, straddling it and familiarizing myself with the grips, lining my feet up with the bars.

A quick glance at Kent assures me I've got my form right, though he's sitting further back given that Remy's slumped in front of him. The purr of my bike joins with the roar of his as I turn it on. His hand moves over the bars, and then he takes off into the night.

It only takes me another few seconds before I twist the throttle, and the bike begins to move.

At first, I think I'm going to crash right at the outset. But then, I get my bearings, twisting the throttle to take me faster. I focus on his lights ahead of me and nothing else, pushing ahead despite the anxiety swirling in my stomach. The night doesn't feel as suffocating as it did before, the air cooler as it slaps at my skin.

My grip on the handles eases as I begin to close the gap between Kent and I, a bit of the stress easing away as my confidence builds. Crashing and getting left behind in the desert or hitting my head and having my brains scattered around the canyon would suck, but the scariest thing I can imagine right now is losing him.

It's all I can think about as we speed to the plane, faster, I think, than on the way there.

I will not lose him.

I can't. We've been chasing each other since we met, orbiting in the same galaxy but never the same constellation. We're finally on the same page.

The dark makes it hard to see and I'm relying on Kent's memory, but after what feels like a brief eternity, the light from his bike illuminates the side of the plane, and I push forward faster until I close the distance. Braking proves to be a little harder than maintaining my balance, gravity pushing me forward so that I slam against the front of the bike and get the air knocked out of me for a second.

But then, I sling myself over the side and run to where Kent is already wrapping Remy around his shoulder. The lights bloom on, and I hear the engine whirring as Simon prepares for the getaway. I run ahead of Kent, to the cockpit, and beat on the door until it opens.

I've never met Simon, but I assume this is him. It's not what I expected him to look like—a middle aged man with a bald head who looks suspiciously like Mr. Clean, earring and all.

"We need the closest hospital! Remy's been shot."

He looks at me, confused, and then his gaze flits behind me to where Kent is emerging at the top of the steps with Remy. He eases him into the nearest chair and then all but collapses, catching himself against the counter.

"Hospital." He says, glancing at Simon. "Hurry."

"Christ," Simon mutters, shaking his head as he turns back to the safety of the cockpit. A moment later, his voice comes over the intercom. "Closest hospital I'd imagine is in Elko. It's about forty minutes, give or take."

"Take…" Kent mutters, just before he falls to the ground.

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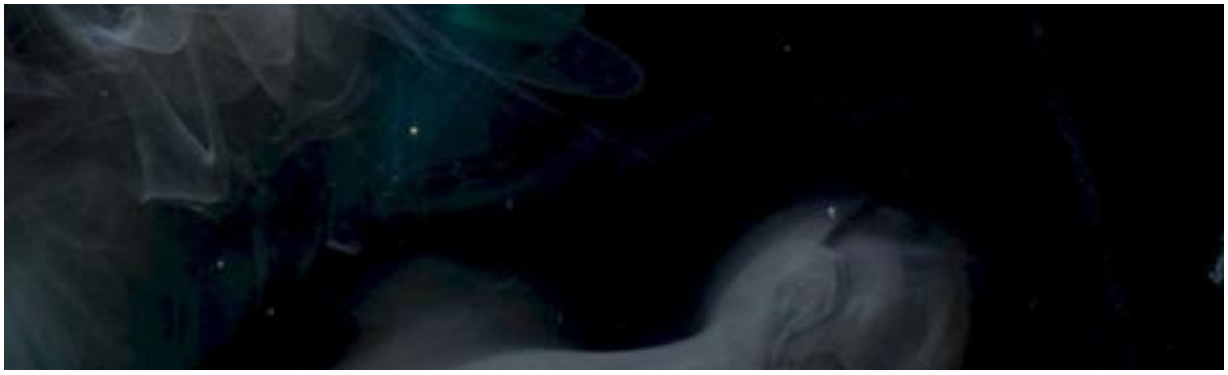

Running into the ER with two men injured with gunshot wounds and me in my bra and jeans draws a crowd… though maybe not as big a crowd as Simon's emergency landing in the baseball field across the street. He helped me get them in, Kent insisting that he's fine and to let him go the whole way. Simon brought Remy in with ease and passed him off on the bewildered ER doctor, who came out of a set of steel doors when I ran in screaming for help.

It all happened so fast. They threw him on a gurney and wheeled him away from me, calling out codes and commands and leaving me with my heart aching and raw. A big woman physically restrained me as I pushed out from under Kent, proving him wrong about being 'fine' when it sent him careening into the wall without my support, and the doors shut me out.

In all the commotion, Simon ran out to find a place better suited for the plane, which left me alone with Kent.

"It's just a kiss," he insisted, over and over again, batting away the hands of the nurse who tried to appraise the wound. "It grazed me."

It was more than a *kiss*, the nurse explained. A through and through shot, which was lucky since it avoided causing any real damage. He cauterized his own wound on the bus when he did Remy's—with the blade of a knife, he explained to the nurse, who clucks her annoyance with him as he continued trying to brush her away.

"Lucky you're Rambo. If you'd lost any more blood, you'd be in real trouble. We've got a shortage of the good stuff tonight."

Kent grunts by way of response, and I almost laugh at the irony, earning a curious glance from her. “We’re not exactly equipped for the level of trauma you brought in. We’re taking donors, though, if you want to contribute to the cause. Free cookie with every poke.”

I stand up automatically. If Remy needs blood to save his life, I’ll be the first to take the needle. I’ll give him as much as he needs, because I think my heart won’t work without him anyway. “Okay.”

“Sit down,” she chuckles, shaking her head. “I’ll send a phlebotomist in as soon as we finish with G.I. Joe here.”

Kent rolls his eyes, immune to the nurse’s attempts to lighten the mood.

I stay in the room as she cleans his burns, muttering about him being a big baby when he grits his teeth and growls at her to leave him alone. When she starts at him with a needle for the IV, he nearly kicks her in the face, and she turns to me for backup, as if *I* could tame the giant.

The nurse disappears, leaving me alone with an irritable Kent.

I never saw him get shot, never noticed he was bleeding. But I did see his wife lying in his arms, and the fact that he left her despite the fact that everything we did tonight was to save her, tells me that she’s indisputably dead. I assume it’s grief that’s got him acting out, so I don’t give him any more of it, sitting quietly in the chair across from the bed he’s perched on, refusing to lie back.

“Where did we go wrong?”

I don’t realize I said it out loud this time. The same thought has played a loop in my mind for over an hour, trying to figure out how our rescue mission went so wrong for the person we were there for.

“They got their hooks in her.” Kent says, his voice thick and throaty. When I glance up at him, surprised that he heard me, I can see tears in his eyes and grief written on his face. He’s trying to hide it, but I can see it in the set of his jaw and the way it trembles despite how hard he’s trying to keep it still. “She wasn’t happy to see me. It was like I was the bad guy… she didn’t even seem to recognize me.”

He drops his head in his hands and rakes his fingers against his scalp, trying to contend with what he’s saying. “She set us up.” His words are muffled until he picks his head up to look at me again, though his eyes are distant, like he’s back there trying to map out how it all went down. “There were two men out there, waiting. Remy got on the bus and the first guy fired two shots. I tried to protect Libby when the other one came at us, but

he wasn't going for her. He was trying to *help* her. I put him down, made to check on Boudreaux. She shot me just as Rich joined us. He… he killed her."

I'm incredibly still, void of the capacity to feel his grief, to sympathize with his loss. It's wrong. If what he's saying is true and she's a victim of Stockholm syndrome, it's not her fault that she betrayed us. But that doesn't let me forgive her. And it doesn't make whatever her job was with those children any better.

I don't dare say as much to Kent. The fact that he moved to Remy's aid rather than staying behind to wallow in his grief is the only proof of his character I need. I simply hang my own head, massaging the furious ache in my temples.

When the nurse returns, I look up to find Kent pacing back and forth, a cell phone pressed against his ear. She scowls at him before turning to hand me a bundle of something. She holds it out for a minute before I take it, and when I do, I recognize them as a clean set of scrubs.

"What about Remy?" I demand. "The other one I came in with? They took him back—"

"To surgery." She nods. "It will probably be a minute before we know anything. Are you family?"

I open my mouth to say that I'm his girlfriend, but I'm not sure that's ever been true. It seems like such a strange title, not enough to convey everything that we've been through together. Kent answers before I ever come to any sort of conclusion.

"She's his wife."

I jump at the hand on my shoulder, so deep in my thoughts that I forgot I'm not alone here, despite how much it feels like it. My head is swimming with the amount of people who have popped out of the woodwork and shown up here in the middle of nowhere to just… wait in this room.

I don't know how long it's been since we got here, but I know that it's all blurred together, and my head hurts and my eyes burn. I turn to find Kent nodding his head down the hall, where Rhea has just run through the doors with Dimitri at her heels.

Everything in me wilts at the sight of her tears, and when she wraps me in her arms, I crumble. If there's anyone besides Remy that I can fall apart on, it's Rhea. My freaking father, my twin sister, Wes. I don't have a relationship with any of them, and despite everything Kent and I have been

through together in the last twenty-four hours, I can't bring myself to break down in front of him… not when he lost his wife again, after all these years.

But Rhea is a safe space. My sister, more than the one who shares my blood. We escape to the room that Kent has routinely been dragging me out of—the one where Wes is situated with Violet at his side. It takes me a moment to remember that I didn't relay this information to Rhea yet, so when she stops dead inside the doorway, I think it's Wes that she's confused by.

"Hello, sister." Wes smirks, stepping away from Remy's bedside. "You look good."

Rhea doesn't even snap back at him, her attitude quelled by the mindfuck I didn't think to warn her about. I haven't said more than two words to Violet—I don't know what I'm supposed to say. And I think she feels the same way. She doesn't look at me with contempt or sadness or anything, but she doesn't look at me like there are so many things she wants to say.

"This is my wife, Violet." Wes explains, gesturing to the woman at his side, who manages a small smile for Rhea. "Violet, this is my sister, Rhea."

"Don't fucking call me that." Rhea breathes, turning from the twisted duo to me as I wipe the tears I let fall. "Claire?"

"Meet my sister." I tell her quietly. I think her head may explode, so I decide to get it all out of the way at the start. "My father is out there, too."

"Your—*what*?"

"Mmhmm." I nod, not knowing how to make it any less weird for her. It's bizarre to me, and I'm living with the knowledge.

"I'm… so confused." Rhea splutters, turning back to the two of them.

Wes pats her on the shoulder as he passes. "Don't worry, sis. There'll be plenty of time to catch up later. And I'm looking forward to it."

He grins at me, though it looks less menacing than ever, and I catch Violet's eye just before she follows him out the door. This time, she does look like she has something she wants to say, but her scarred cheeks tip up a little, gracing me with a soft smile instead.

As soon as they're gone, Rhea shuts the door and lets out a long breath, rubbing her temples. "I have so many questions," she breathes. "What are they doing here?"

I swallow past the lump in my throat, which feels extraordinarily dry. "I don't know who called them. They just showed up, but Wes…" I sigh. "Wes saved his life."

There’s a long pause where she stares at me, waiting for the punchline. But it isn’t coming, because I’m telling the truth. I scrub my hands over my face, like maybe that will wake me up a little. I’ve never been so tired, but sleep is the last thing I want to do.

“When he got here, Remy was still in surgery. Nobody would tell me anything, but he started asking questions, dropping names. Next thing I know, they gave him privileges to scrub in and he just… disappeared. When he came out, he was in full surgical gear, and he said it went well.” I choke on a laugh, not because it’s funny, but because I feel like I slipped into some sort of alternate reality.

Rhea’s gaze turns to her brother, the other forgotten as she approaches his bed and sinks down to her knees. “They let him operate?”

“This isn’t a trauma center. They weren’t prepared for the level of care he needed.”

She swallows, nodding. “But he hasn’t woken up yet?”

I shake my head, and then, realizing she can’t see me, manage to croak out a ‘no’. She grabs his hand, squeezing it between her own, before turning to look at me. Her eyes are wide, terrified. It matches how I feel inside. “You don’t think… Wes did something?”

I have thought about it. It’s run through my mind a thousand times in the hours since he came out of that O.R. with a smug smirk. Even if he didn’t do anything on purpose, I know his hand isn’t the same as it was before I stabbed him. Just a slip of the scalpel could ruin everything, and he’s still alive—the colored lines on the monitor confirm as much—but I don’t know why he isn’t awake yet. Neither does his doctor, a middle-aged woman with a mostly-gray bun on her head. *“We just have to wait for him”*, she said.

I’d wait an eternity for him, but I need more than that. Wes wasn’t concerned, but concerned is all I am. Everything has been shaken up, and I don’t know how it will ever settle again.

“Are you okay?” Rhea asks, running me up and down. And then she laughs, realizing the irony. It takes a moment, but when it hits me, it’s too absurd not to laugh, too.

“That’s a stupid fucking question,” I manage, giggling so much that I can hardly breathe, and making her laugh harder, too.

Tears are streaming down my face by the time I get in enough air to stop the fit of laughter, and I may have peed myself a little. Rhea’s laughter

peters out last, and when she wipes her cheeks with the palms of her hands, she grins at me.

“God, I’ve missed you.”

“I missed you too.” I tell her, tears pricking at my eyes that have just as much to do with the fit as they do with how hopeless I feel.

I launch myself at her, telling her everything that’s happened since the last time we *really* talked. When I get to the part about the senator’s wife and how I slit her throat to stop Violet’s maniacal sculpting, I think her eyes may bug out of her head.

“I’ve always told you I would help you hide a body, but… you just confessed… to murder?”

I squint at her, wondering why she sounds so shocked. This isn’t the first time. Remy told her everything—or at least, he said he did.

“Yeah,” I say, slowly. “My second one… third if you count Evan Ludlow.” I shake my head. “Hey, when do I become a serial killer? Is that *after* your third victim?” Rhea stares at me, her mouth opening and closing. It’s absurd, but it makes me laugh. “What’s the difference between a serial killer and just a plain murderer? When does it become mass murder?” I giggle at the shock in her eyes, which launches me into a fit of hysterics.

When I get control of myself, I clear my throat. “You told me in Costa Rica that Remy told you ‘everything’.”

“He did…” She stutters. “Or, I thought he did. He didn’t tell me that you __”

“I took vengeance on my enemy?” I say cryptically, my lips twisting with more of the laughter I’m trying to contain.

“You…” She shakes her head, swallowing. “You are a badass.”

I snort out a laugh but choose not to fight the point. I don’t feel like a badass… not anymore. I did feel that way, once, when I’d had everything.

“I’ve never been more scared.” I tell her honestly, my voice as small as I feel.

Fear for my life, for pain that could be brought down upon me in a million different ways, is visceral. In the moment, it’s a horror like no other. But it’s nothing compared to how I feel in this moment, with everyone needing something from me.

I tell Rhea everything about the mission, about Kent’s wife, about Remy getting shot and the kids I abandoned because I couldn’t leave him. And

when I’m done, I tell her, “And now they’re waiting on me to decide what to do with all of them. I have no clue.”

“They’re… waiting for you to decide?”

“Kent told me it’s my call because normally Remy would decide, and since he can’t, apparently, that’s on me?” I laugh despite not being amused. “I can’t have them take a busload of kids across the border, even though my first choice would be to send them to the hotel in Costa Rica with the others. Kent said they can’t get in touch with any of the families of the ones who know where they came from, and the ones who don’t…” I rake my hands through my hair, which feels gross. I stood under the stream of water long enough to rinse Remy and Kent’s blood off of me, but it still smells like pennies brining in dirty water.

“Calm down,” Rhea says, bracing her hands on both of my shoulders. “It’s okay.”

“Nothing is okay.” I laugh, because I’m tired of crying. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Yes, you do,” she insists, smiling a little. “You almost have a degree in Child Welfare. You’re perfectly qualified for this.”

“*Almost*.” I repeat the qualifier. “I don’t know what to do here. And I also don’t want those kids to grow up in the same system I did.”

“They won’t,” she assures me with a gentle smile. “Remember what I gave you? For your birthday?”

It takes a moment to get my brain off of the panic track it’s on and then to sift through the memories, but I land on the memory of our fight, when she told me she never got to give me her birthday gift and handed me a piece of paper.

“The… house?”

I kind of forgot about that, but now that she’s recalled the memory, it strikes me again how random it is. It’s not that I’m opposed to living with her—we have for years, and I can’t imagine a better roommate. But won’t it be weird when things start to get serious between her and whoever she decides to eventually get serious with?

“Yes. I never got to tell you why I bought it.”

“Okay,” I say, not sure why we’re on this topic now. I feel like when I blinked, I fell asleep and missed something. My brain feels like it’s lagging.

“When we flew to Costa Rica last year, Remy asked me what I wanted to do with my degree, and I told him that I had a multi-part plan.”

“Right,” I agree, even though I’m not sure what I’m agreeing with at this point.

“Long story short, there’s one moment in my life where I decided everything I wanted to be and do. And I was a kid, so obviously, my goals have changed. I used to want to own a gallery.”

It takes me a moment to remember what a gallery even is, and I look around the room for the water I left somewhere in here. “Yeah?”

“Yes,” she continues, unbothered by my straying attention as I grab the water bottle and uncap it, taking a long swig. “But I kind of gave up on that, because once you’ve seen a Matisse go for more than your best friend, it kinda ruins it, you know?”

I stare at her, my mouth falling open slowly as her words register. I’m not sure whether I should be offended or amused at her observation.

“Yeah,” I finally say, now curious to see where this is going.

“So, my other initiatives became priority, and I sort of worked them together into some kind of Frankenstein creation. Remy apparently took a page out of my playbook when he opened his humanitarian hotel,” she laughs, glancing fondly at her brother. “So, the last objective was the one I really hoped you’d join me on. Maybe I should have asked before I bought the house, but—”

She shrugs, and I realize she actually isn’t waiting to finish.

“What’s the objective?” I ask, not sure if she hasn’t said it or if I just missed it.

“Saving you. Or, I suppose, saving people from going through what you went through. I always wanted my parents to have more kids, so I could have little brothers and sisters to take care of. Thank God they didn’t, knowing what I know now.” She laughs. “I’ve always liked kids, and I had everything available to me growing up, but it was shit. My parents were awful, had no clue what they were doing. And you had nothing growing up. So, if we combined those things,” she clasps her hands together dramatically, like I’m supposed to understand the direction her brain is headed.

“Shitty parents with everything at your fingertips plus nothing at your fingertips *plus* shitty parents, equals?”

“Take the shitty parents out of the equation,” she waves her hand, like she’s literally removing that factor. “Because we won’t be shitty parents.”

Tears prick at the backs of my eyes as she hits on one of the fears that's been plaguing me. "I really hope not."

Maybe Rhea doesn't hear me, or she just doesn't want to dignify that with a response, but she continues. "The house is for the kids."

"What kids?"

"Any of them," she shrugs. "All of them. As many as we can fit, I don't care. There are thirteen rooms in the main house, and I've bought the lot next door so we can build there, too. It's perfect… I mean, I guess there's always the danger of living near water, but it's Florida. We'll just have to teach the kids to swim. You're a good swimmer, so that shouldn't be an issue and—"

"Rhea?" I interrupt her. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about an orphanage, but that word is canceled, I think, so let's call it a care facility for children? It's a place for kids to go to keep them out of the broken system that you despise. We can raise them like mothers, like family. When they're old enough to start jobs or their own families, they won't just get thrown out the way you were with a handshake and a good luck. They'll stay our family. I have the money to take care of them."

"That's ridiculous." I scoff. "We haven't even finished college, and you think we can just adopt a bunch of children to raise them as ours? Who would let us do that?"

"The State of Florida, for starters." Rhea laughs. "We just need to get the right accreditation, but there's actually a few states where we can do it. If we can grow our network of trusted sources, we could open them up in almost every state. I went with the Miami one first because I know you love to be by the water, and when I heard Austin talk about his family selling it, it just felt right."

There's a lull in the conversation as I appraise her, trying to figure out if she's serious about all of this.

Apparently, yes.

"You sound insane." I tell her.

Rhea opens her mouth to object, but the voice that fills the air isn't hers.

"That's because she is."

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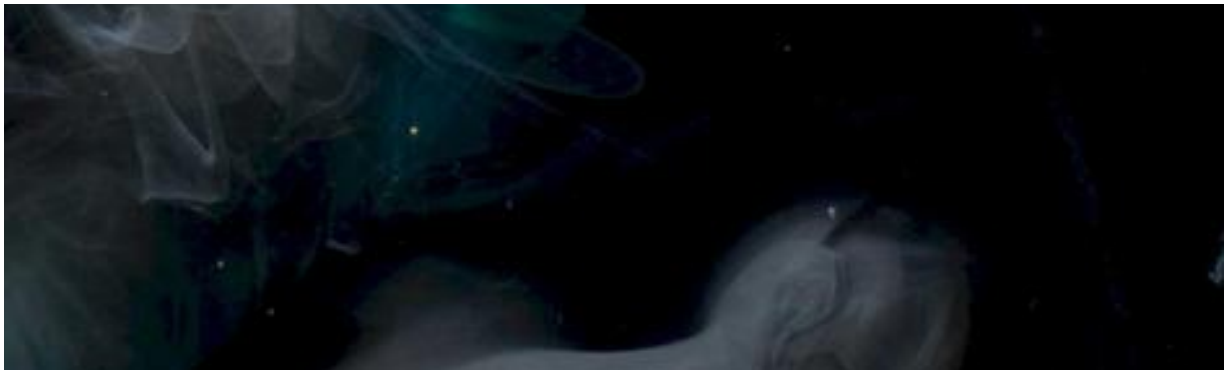

“I hear someone’s going ho—” The nurse’s chipper voice cuts off when she sees the death glare I’m giving her. I indicate Claire, who’s curled up against me, her blonde hair splayed out across my chest, her drool pooling underneath me on the sheets. I don’t dare move her.

Every time I’ve woken up this week, she’s watching me, never sleeping despite the fact she looks exhausted. Beautiful, but exhausted. I guess that’s my fault for getting shot and nearly dying.

I think I was closer to death than I’ll ever let on, but it was filled with her the whole time. I dreamed of the sweetest things—a life without pain or struggle, a family of beautiful kids that look just like her, a home that always smells like whatever Elaine’s cooking. Waking up was almost sad, but then I heard her and Rhea, and they threw themselves at me, and I decided I can make the reality better than the fantasy.

It's been three days since I woke up, and it’s been three days of torture as I’ve had her in my bed and been unable to do anything about it. The catheter up my dick was kind of a mood killer, but now that it’s out, I can hardly wait to be inside of her. She dulls the pain just by being near, but I know once I’m inside her, that it will melt away completely. And maybe it’s selfish of me to want her so badly when things haven’t exactly been easy. I’ve watched her juggle the stream of visitors, the calls from Dimitri and Kent and Rich and the ones from Elaine, too. Apparently, Claire has an admirer back in Costa Rica, eagerly waiting for her return. But I’m not willing to share her just yet.

I got her back for less than a day the way she was, and then I got myself shot. These last few days have been interrupted by a constant stream of people barging in—doctors, nurses, priests, well-meaning family members, more nurses… like now.

“You have everything in order?” I ask, taking the folder she passes to me.

“It’s all here. We already gave you the talk, but as a reminder, avoid operating any heavy machinery, don’t lift anything over fifteen pounds, no —” I cut her off with a wave of my hand, not interested in hearing the dog and pony show.

“We’ll be staying until she wakes up.” I inform the nurse. “I don’t want to be interrupted again.”

Her lips part, and I think she’s going to object, but then she shakes her head. “Fine. If you wanna pay for the extra time, be my guest. It’s not like we need the room.”

It’s been quiet the last few days, which has been obnoxious, since it’s allowed all of the staff to focus on me. I also think it may be why they made me stay the extra time... when I go, they’ll be bored.

Our entourage has certainly kept the hospital staff entertained— Violet apparently loves to bake, and I have no idea where they’re going to at night for her to bake, and I also haven’t gotten the courage to try anything from her after watching how easily she stabbed Addison, but the nurses love her daily treats. The senator has charmed the pants off a few of them, maybe even literally, because he’s clearly going through something. I’d think Wes was doing the same, but I’m not sure Violet is into sharing, and he’d have to be even dumber than he already is to cross her. I sent my own sister and Dimitri back to school to finish her degree so that she can make good on the plan she explained to Claire, but the rest of them are here like a fucking plague I can’t get rid of.

“Tell them I’m gone.” I tell Nurse Amy, just before she ducks out the door. She laughs, shaking her head without any need for further explanation.

I don’t know how much time passes. I’m counting the freckles on the tip of Claire’s nose when I feel her move, just a little at first. And then she sits up, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Oh my god,” she groans. “How embarrassing.”

“It’s cute,” I argue, tapping the tip of her nose, where I got to five freckles before she moved.

“Cute?” She groans again. “Just what every woman wants the man who she loves to call her.”

“I could give you the ABC’s, if you want. You’re Astounding, beautiful, cute, desirable, elegant—”

“No.” She claps a hand to my mouth, effectively cutting me off, and shakes her head. “No more.”

When I laugh, she lets her hand fall and wipes at her eyes, like she can chase away the need for sleep. “They still haven’t been in with the discharge paperwork?”

“They have.” I tell her, moving some hair off of her face. “But we’re not leaving this bed until we’ve made good use of it.”

Claire stares at me, her eyes flitting to the file folder on the tray next to the bed. “Good use of it?” She repeats. “I thought you’d be sick of this bed by now.”

“Oh, I am.” I assure her. “But I’ll never get sick of your sweet pussy, and I need it so bad right now.”

Claire’s mouth falls open, her eyes wide. “You can’t be serious.”

“Deadly so.” I nod, pulling my bottom lip between my teeth to try and alleviate some of the need building in me. “I almost died, and you wouldn’t have been the last thing I tasted. It’s a crime we need to remedy immediately.”

“Not a chance.” She rolls off the bed, but I catch her wrist before she can stand, tugging her back down to the mattress beside me. “Please,” I beg, dusting a finger along her collarbone and delighting in the way her breathing picks up. “I need you so bad. I’ve been on my best behavior.”

Begging is new for me, but it seems to be doing something for both of us, judging by the little moan that slips out of the back of her throat. I slip my hand beneath her top, running a finger over her nipple, making her back arch.

“We can’t…”

“Of course we can.”

“No,” she shakes her head, but I press my mouth to hers before she can tell me why, enticing her into a kiss that starts soft and sweet. But the need grows in both of us, and my cock is throbbing, desperate for her to soothe the ache. I can feel her relent, and by the time I pull away and tell her to draw the curtain, she’s putty in my hands… which is fitting, because that’s how she makes me feel.

She pulls at her lip with her teeth, contemplating it. “We can’t. You just had surgery…”

“Days ago.” I tell her. “On my chest, not my dick.”

“But you shouldn’t be… exerting yourself.”

“So, then you should sit on my face before I have to bend you over the side of this bed and take my dessert for myself.”

“Remy—”

Her objection is curtailed when I begin to move, following through on my threat.

“Fine!” She laughs, shaking her head. The beautiful tint on her cheeks makes the blood rush to my cock faster as I lean back, getting into position while she snaps the little curtain around the bed closed. She shimmies out of the pants fast, like she’s worried she’ll lose the nerve if she doesn’t get out of them quickly enough.

I groan, sure that I’m already leaking at the sight of her as she strips her top off too, letting her tits bounce freely.

Her eyes rake over me, and then she tugs my pants and my boxers down to my knees. “You’ll have to be a good boy and promise not to touch, or I’ll stop.”

“I—” I’m not sure what she is threatening me for until she climbs over my waist, straddling me. There’s a hint of nervousness in her eyes as I search them, and then she reaches around to grip my cock and I could combust from that alone. Thankfully, she doesn’t waste time, guiding me to her entrance. When I thrust up to greet her, she pushes my hips down with a tsking sound, and then sinks down onto me in one swift motion that pulls a moan out of both of us.

God, she’s so tight, so warm. I groan, knowing I’m not going to be able to hold out very long, and she freezes. “Is this okay? Are you hurt?”

“No.” I shake my head fervently. “No, I—I need you to fuck me, baby, because if you don’t, I’m going to come just from this and then I may die of embarrassment.”

She stares at me for a moment, and then her laugh causes her to tighten around me, and I groan. “God damn, Claire. Put me out of my misery, baby. I need this so fucking bad. *Please*.”

My voice cracks on the last word, desperation weighing it down. I reach up to cup her breasts, needing to do something with my hands, but she

shakes her head. “No touching. I’m not risking you busting open your stitches.”

I want to tell her we’re in a hospital, and I’d rip myself open a thousand times if I got to feel this way every time I did it. But I let her push my hands back instead, guiding them to the mattress. I’m fairly certain I fucked her like this, and she seems to enjoy the role reversal as she holds me down, using that grip as her anchor point.

She’s careful not to lay a hand on me, not to let any of her weight fall on me as she arches up, letting me slip out of her and then sinks back down on me. I grit my teeth together, focusing on breathing through my nose, on watching her move above me as she finds a rhythm.

Fuck, it’s a beautiful one she finds, thrusting against me, pulling away, impaling herself again, grinding her hips over me. I watch her eyelashes flutter as her clit rubs against me, the pleasure starting to mount in her and override the fear of hurting me.

When she releases my hands, it takes everything in me to stay where she wants them, not to feel her under my skin, not to pull a nipple into my mouth. Instead, I suck in a deep breath, focusing on keeping it together. Claire clearly seems to be enjoying the ride, and I don’t want it to be over too soon.

“Fuck, cowgirl…” I groan, fighting for my life. “You do this so well.”

She grips the bedrails for extra leverage, increasing her speed and bouncing up and down on me faster, harder. Her grip on me is too good—I can’t fight it any longer when she lets out a loud moan, and then my name is on her lips and I’m a fucking goner. She fucks me through the release, her speed increasing, her grinding growing more desperate as I start to come down. But she doesn’t let me, keeping me in agonizing bliss as she works me, chasing her own pleasure now.

When she finds it, her entire body shudders and I’ve never seen anything so fucking perfect as her back arches, her lips cry out glorious defeat. She falls forward, catching herself on the bed rails. Her mouth hovers over mine despite the fact that she’s keeping herself aloft by her surprising upper body strength. We’re still connected, my cock still pulsing inside her, and little sounds are still accompanying small twitches of her hips… aftershocks.

I grip the back of her neck and pull her against me, making her give up the fight. As her hands come down to either side of my head, I devour her, making sure she knows that this is only a taste of what’s left to come. When

at last she pulls away, her chest is heaving, and she sucks in a deep breath as if I've been depriving her. And maybe I have.

"You're so fucking perfect, Claire." I tell her, pressing another kiss to the top of her forehead. "I'm never letting you go."

"Well, you have to right now." She laughs, twisting away from me. "Because I have to pee."

"Hold it a minute longer." I groan, not yet ready for her to lift her hips off of me.

"You're ridiculous." She shakes her head, swinging her leg over me and freeing herself. When she stands up, letting me get a glance at her in all her post-orgasm glory, I can't take my eyes off of her.

"I'm obsessed." I correct her. "And who could blame me?"

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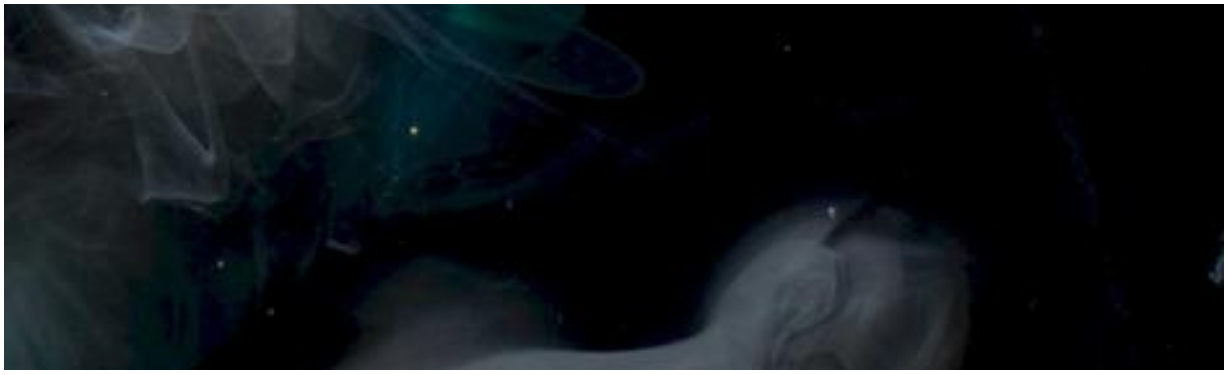

“Florida, huh?” Remy asks, peering out the window at the expanse of palm trees lining the path down the drive.

“Blame Rhea,” I shrug, tapping the steering wheel nervously. I know that my family is waiting for me at the end of this drive—the family I never knew I had, and the ones that have been pulled into our world. I’m lucky, sure, to have found them all. But honestly, all I want right now is Remy.

It’s not that I don’t *want* the rest of them, but I’m too tired to deal with it all, and there is a lot that needs dealt with.

“I thought we’d go to Texas,” Remy says, “and get you a Stetson…”

“A Stetson?” I ask, glancing over to find him smirking at me.

“Yeah,” he grins, a wicked little tip of his full lips. “A cowboy hat.”

My jaw falls open as the joke falls into place. “I’d smack you if you weren’t injured.”

“Don’t be offended, sweetheart. It’s a compliment. Best sex of my life.”

“I think you were just high on painkillers.” I roll my eyes, but he shakes his head emphatically.

“Not a chance. The way you rode me? Well, let’s just say I can never attend a rodeo now.”

“Was that another one of your secret billionaire talents?” I muse. “Bull-riding?”

“No.” He laughs. “But it’s ruined either way.”

I shake my head, trying not to let the fear creep in to this perfect moment. This sort of banter is what drew us together, what made me fall for him. I

haven’t even picked myself back up yet.

Our time together has been a whirlwind from the start, and I still don’t feel that I’ve caught my breath.

“I wish we’d just gone to Costa Rica,” I huff, noting all the cars lined up in the driveway.

“It’s not too late,” Remy shrugs. “I could call Simon, ask him to come meet us.”

I’m fairly certain he’s serious—he’d do it, if that’s what I really want. But running from my problems won’t make them go away.

“It’s tempting.” I sigh.

Remy grins, already knowing that I’m not changing my mind. As much as I want to hide away with Remy in a little bubble of bliss, we have obligations to a lot of people.

When I park the car, he only glances at me, waiting for my command.

“I just need a minute,” I promise, running a finger along the steering wheel, lost in my thoughts.

“You own them all, Claire.” He shrugs again, like he doesn’t mind waiting in the car with me all night. “Just let me know when.”

The sun is slipping behind the house, and I don’t doubt that from the beach, it must be a gorgeous view. Shades of pink and hints of purple break through the clouds, softening the light in the car.

There are a million ways I could tell him, but I don’t think any of it will make any of this easier on me, so I swallow the stale air in my lungs and turn to him, blowing out a breath.

“I have to tell you something.”

“You mean that you and Rhea bought this house so you could raise a bunch of children like they’re your own?” He laughs as my jaw falls open. Before I can even ask just how long he was eavesdropping in the hospital, he laughs. “When you flew home last summer and she stayed behind to take care of some business, she was looking for properties.”

“She…” I blink, processing that information. “She’s been planning this since last summer?”

“Probably longer. Who knows with her? Honestly, I was glad to support it. If she pulled this off, you’d get the family you wanted without another man touching you, and that’s one less murder I’d have to commit.”

I study his face, looking for any sign that he’s joking, but find nothing. “Sorry, you mean you wanted me to become a… foster mom so that I’d get

kids without having to fuck someone else?”

“You left me because you wanted kids.” He argues. “I was terrified you were going to make it happen. The night you called me to ask if you could fuck the whole football team?”

I cringe and then bury my face in my hands.

“That wasn’t my finest moment.”

“I told you that you were free to do whatever you wanted,” Remy says, “but I texted Moose that I’d slit his throat if I found out another man so much as laid a hand on you. Not my finest moment… but I’d do it over again.”

I’m not sure what possesses me, but this feels like a good time to come clean. “I tried to seduce him.” I rush out. “Moose. Not because I wanted him, but because I wanted to feel… *wanted*.”

To my surprise, Remy doesn’t look angry about that. Instead, he traces the side of my face with gentle fingers, outlining my cheek, my lips, my jaw. “You’re wanted, baby. I’ve wanted nothing but you since I saw you in my room.”

I nod, refusing to let that admission make me swoon. “But only me. Not a family, kids…” I gesture to the home in front of us, which is tall and almost palatial. It has a smaller blueprint than Remy’s home or the Boudreaux’s Oregon residence, but it’s probably just as huge in terms of square footage. “How am I going to have anything with you when I have to make a commitment to these kids? What am I going to do, alternate weekends and split holidays? You’re willing to share partial custody of me with your sister?”

“Partial custody?” He laughs. “No, I wouldn’t consider that. I’m never letting you out of my sight again. I’ll be installing your GPS tracker soon.”

“It’s not funny.” I shake my head, staring out at the building before us.

“I’m not joking.” Remy assures me, catching my hand and giving it a gentle squeeze.

“I’m about to be responsible for thirteen children.” I shake my head. We were able to reunite eight children with their families after the crew scanning through pixelated missing children’s photos for the better part of a week, but there are still a baker’s dozen who can’t be traced, who have no one… except me. “*Me*. I didn’t even finish college. I can barely take care of myself, and I’m going to play mother to a bunch of kidnapped children? That’s fucking insane. You realize that?”

Despite telling me he wasn't joking, his lips twitch as he appraises me. And then he sobers for a minute. "You know you don't have to do this? We can back out and no one would blame you."

"I'm not backing out," I shake my head.

"You want to do this?"

I hesitate for only a minute. I do want this. I've always wanted this—to rewrite my story for someone else. I want to be someone's safe space, their port in the storm. The thing is, I always imagined being that for a child, but I think I may be that for Remy, too.

"I want you, too."

He lifts a brow, glancing out the windshield for a minute before turning back to me. "You have me. I'm not going anywhere."

I roll my eyes at him, appreciating the sentiment, but it does nothing to solve our predicament. He may think he's in, but he already told me, pretty much from the start, that he didn't want anything like this.

"You don't believe me?" He pouts.

"Do I believe that you want to raise other people's kids as your own? Do I believe that you want to give up your bachelor lifestyle to play Papa Bear?" I laugh. "Sorry, but no."

"I thought that I couldn't *have* this life, Claire. I pushed you away because it wasn't fair to string you along with promises of what you could have, but I wouldn't give you."

"Is that not what you're doing now?" I challenge.

"No." He shakes his head. "Because I've realized I'd rather hurt every day of my life for one perfect day with you. I realized that I'd give you the heart in my chest even if I knew you were going to stomp on it, because it's fucking worthless to me without you. I realized that the only reason I didn't want a family was because I thought I'd just be breeding soldiers for this fucked up Brotherhood my parents sold me into. I want it all, Claire, and I want it with you by my side."

I swipe at the tears that broke free from my eyes and slipped down my cheek, sniffling. "I'm supposed to believe that six months changed your mind?"

"No." He shakes his head. "Not six months. It took one single moment for me to realize that I should have built you a fucking rocket and brought you the moon back in pieces. It took one single moment to realize that if anything happened to you, I'd never forgive myself for letting you down. It

took one single moment for me to realize that I want what you want, because all I want is for you to be happy, because that's what love is. I didn't know it before, and that made me scared to have a family, because how could I love them if I didn't even know what it was supposed to be like? My parents never had that to give me, you didn't have anyone to give it to you. But I found it in you, and now I know that I'll be a good father to thirteen kids or thirty-two or forty-five, because your love is infinite. It feeds mine."

I feel like I could choke on the air, and I'm pretty sure my heart skips several beats before it returns to a normal rhythm, though I feel it pounding against my ribcage, like it's trying to break out of its restraints and get to him. My throat is thick with tears I won't shed, because I'm putting on a brave face, pretending that all of what he just said isn't downright terrifying.

Guess it's my turn to even the score. I let out a caged breath and find the courage to glance at him from the corner of my eye.

If he's going to run, I bet this will be the moment.

"I'm pregnant."

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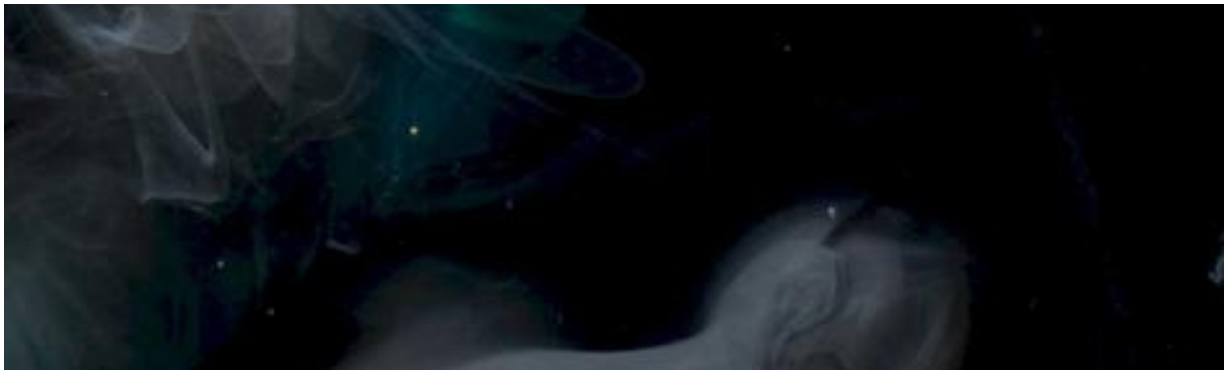

I only stare at her, not sure I heard her right. I thought she was going to say she was scared, that she didn't know how to do this. But I think she just told me…

"Pregnant?"

"Apparently. When you were in surgery, they mentioned there was a shortage of blood. Kent wanted to donate, but he'd lost too much for that, and I wanted to do something to take my mind off of the situation, so I agreed to donate. A little while later, the phlebotomist came by and told me that they did their routine testing, and I had a high level of HCG? I didn't feel pregnant, I still don't, other than I'm so fucking tired. I thought maybe she got the sample confused, so I took a test and… I mean, it was faint, cause it's so early, but it was positive."

She lets go of a long breath, having rushed all of that off her tongue like she was running out of time to use her voice.

"You—"

I don't know what's wrong with me, but I can't get a cohesive thought to stick in my head, much less move to my mouth.

"I didn't sleep with anyone, Remy."

I hate that she even feels the need to give me that disclaimer. Of course, she didn't sleep with anybody. She wouldn't do that, just as I wouldn't. We may not have been together the last few months, but we were still loyal to each other. But I haven't questioned her about everything that happened in

Evan Ludlow's basement. I wanted her to tell me what she wanted to, when she wanted to, but this—

"Ludlow?"

"No," she shakes her head fast. "God, no. He was a fucking sadist, but he never made it that far."

I try not to let her see the relief I feel at that. "But when?"

"The tub." She laughs. "It was probably the most unsexy consummation ever."

"Fuck." I whisper, replaying that memory in my head. I disagree with it not being a sexy consummation. Maybe it wasn't our most passionate moment, but I needed it… we needed it.

"I'm sorry." She rushes, shaking her head. "I couldn't bring myself to go back on birth control after Jovich poisoned me, and then I was celibate for months. That night, I didn't even think about it because I—"

I shake my head and reach out to pinch her lips together, cutting off her rambling. I hear the affronted gasp as she stares at me, and then I let go, kissing her lips before she can say anything more.

Claire hesitates, at first. I feel her halting breath on my mouth, and I wonder what she's thinking. I wish I could turn her brain off for her, stop her thoughts from their furious spiral.

When I let my lips fall from hers, I don't pull away, tipping her chin in my hand and using that to hold her still.

"First of all, don't apologize to me for the best fucking news I've heard since you told me you loved me in the back of my plane."

Something between a laugh and a sob gets caught in her chest. "The best news?"

"Are you kidding me?" I laugh, throwing my head back against the seat and closing my eyes.

I wanted a family… I always did. When the future I dreamed of with Monica was stolen from me, I thought it would never be in the cards. Barely even a few months later, Genevieve told me she was carrying our child… that she would be my family. And though I knew better than to hope for something good to come of it, I let myself be lulled into complacency. When she took my son from me, I thought there could be no greater pain. But then there was… the pain of thinking I lost the one person I knew I loved.

I wanted a family. I thought it would look different, and I thought it would be with a different woman, but this was always what I was meant to have. She's my reward for all the suffering of my past… her, and our baby. But a terrifying thought strikes me.

"Is everything okay with it? I mean, with Jovich having poisoned your birth control, it didn't… hurt anything?"

"I don't think so." Claire purses her lips thoughtfully. "Other than almost killing me, of course."

"We should set up an appointment right away, just to make sure everything is okay." Claire still looks hesitant to believe that I really want this. "Fuck if I could kill that bastard all over again, I would."

Claire sighs. "I mean, he played Russian Roulette with my birth control. Was that his contingency plan, and handing me over to Davos was a crime of opportunity?"

I'm not sure how to answer that. Dimitri filled me in, of course, the minute he had the results from the lab. I've known for months that my former right-hand man wanted to poison her, but I wasn't sure why until the night Addison confessed to her sinister role in Lauren's murder… and the torture that preceded it.

"I still don't understand why he hated me so much." Claire frowns, as if that's a question that's really been plaguing her for the last half year.

I consider not saying anything, pretending I am just as clueless as I was back when I trusted him. But I've already resolved to give her anything and everything she wants for the rest of her life. "Do you really want to know?"

Her surprise is obvious as her eyes flit over my face, but she doesn't really hesitate. "Yes."

"I suspect that he was scared of you… that you might be his daughter."

"What?" She laughs. "Why would I be his—?" She covers her mouth with a hand before the rest of her sentence can come. "No."

"We know now that he isn't but think about it."

"I don't want to." She shakes her head.

"I know," I pull her against my chest, and she resists me just enough to avoid the surgical site there, but relents anyway. "He knew what he did. You heard Addison… my father was there. Jovich was always with him. When you showed up, he probably thought you were her ghost back for revenge or something. You disturbed him. And he saw that from the first moment

she saw you, Elaine recognized you, that you look like your mother. You were a problem, and Jovich specialized in getting rid of problems."

"This is the world we're bringing a child into?" She asks after a minute. "It feels… selfish."

"I wouldn't say that. It's terrifying, sure, but the only way to drive away the darkness is with light. That's what new life is… kids."

She's still a moment as she contemplates that, and then she looks out at the house before us, the exterior lights illuminating every surface so that no shadows can press in on our space. The stars are starting to punch through the blanket of night sky, adding to the cozy feeling.

"I don't know how to be a mom." She says, after a few moments of silence. She says it like some shameful confession, and I almost feel bad for laughing at her.

"And I don't know how to be a dad. We'll figure it out."

"Maybe mine can help you." She teases. "I've heard he's a good father when he actually knows about his kids."

"Maybe." I agree.

To be honest, trying to imagine the senator acting as my father-in-law is weird to me. I suppose once you've arranged for the murder of someone's wife, it will be weird to sit across the table from them and ask them to pass the gravy on holidays.

"Claire Massarini." She says suddenly, her whisper heavy in the space between us. I turn sharply to her to see her nose crinkled in disgust. "No, that's terrible."

"Yeah, it is." I agree.

Claire turns to me in shock. "You're not supposed to agree!"

I only snort a laugh, amused. "You really think I'd let you take another man's last name?" She stares at me for a long moment, shock mingling with confusion. "I don't care if he is your father. You were born to be Claire Boudreaux… my wife."

"Right." She rolls her eyes, not believing me.

As if I'd let her take his name… as if I'd let her give my child any other.

"Speaking of your father," I warn, nodding toward the front door that's opened up, letting the foyer light spill out into the inky night. He's striding right toward us, each step full of purpose. "I guess our time's up."

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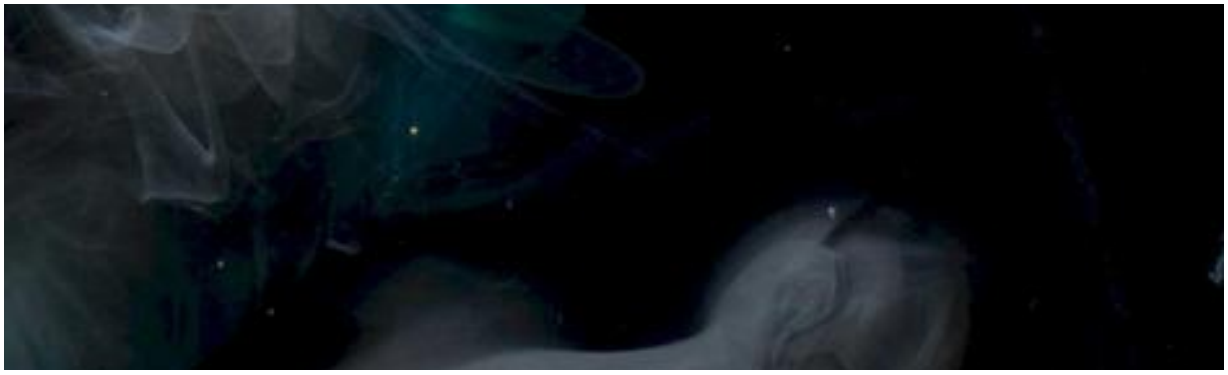

The last few months have been a blur, much the way my life has been from the very moment he came into it. Flying all around the world to finish my degree, tend to the children, check up on everyone in Costa Rica, and attend the doctor's appointments Remy keeps setting up for me has made it all blend together.

We've been graduated for a month, but I have barely had a chance to breathe. It's why I'm looking forward to a night off, with just me and Remy… and the tagalong that is a part of the equation for the next six months.

It's weird that we've never had a proper date, considering I'm carrying his baby. That's about as big a commitment as there is. I mean, I've given him a thousand chances to run, and he hasn't taken any of them yet. I'll probably give him a thousand more between now and the arrival of this little one, even though I'm pretty sure he's intent on not taking any of them.

"You look so pretty!" Misty says, watching my reflection in the mirror as I turn, doubting my choice in dress. At just over four months pregnant, I look awkward… not quite pregnant, not fat. I don't mind anything about this whole experience; I kind of love every minute of it… even the ones where I'm bent over the toilet with Remy rubbing my neck.

"Are you sure?" I ask, catching her eye in the mirror. "I think I look… weird."

The top is a bit tight, and the waist clings to me so that from the front, I don't even look any different. But when I turn to the side…

Remy has loved the changes in my body, of course.

Extra sensitivity? Increased sex drive? Bigger boobs? What's not to like for a red-blooded man? He loves it now, but when I'm batting him away from me in a few months because I'm the size of a house, I bet he'll be over it all too and eager for his girlfriend back.

"You look like a mom." Misty smiles, the sides of her eyes crinkling under her purple glasses.

"I guess that's a good thing." I say, flipping my hair off my shoulder. "Seeing as there are some kids around here who keep calling me that."

Her giggle is short but loud and full of joy.

Most of the kids have adjusted fabulously. Misty is no exception, though she *is* exceptional at everything else. She's my biggest ally with getting the younger kids to eat their vegetables, she reads (albeit haltingly) to the toddlers before bed every night, and she is my biggest cheerleader. Every time I doubt what I'm doing, she's there to wrap her little arms around my growing middle. At thirteen, I don't think she has any concept yet of what life might have been like if none of it ever happened. If she hadn't been stolen from her mother on their sightseeing trip to the desert, who knows what she'd be up to instead of acting like a mini mom to a bunch of orphans? And if we hadn't found them when we went to retrieve Kent's wife, who knows where in the world she would have ended up. Sold to a family who desperately wanted a kid of their own? Sold to someone who would force her to grow up ahead of schedule?

If I have my way, these kids will never know what horrors the world is capable of. It's a ridiculous belief that I can shelter them all, particularly given that many of them already witnessed their own parents being murdered so they could be taken. No amount of counseling or pseudo-parenting can make up for that trauma, but we're trying.

I named our home the Lighthouse, and all thirteen kids are legally under our care. Wes reached out to his friend who helped him find Kent's wife and he ran them through his database, but every one of them was erased.

I've always heard it takes a village, and that is probably especially true considering we've got a village full of children. They outnumber us, but between all of us, it works. Remy and I moved into the house right after he got out of the hospital—we didn't plan it that way, but it's become our home. Rhea joined us with Dimitri a few weeks later. Kent showed up one day and never left.

Then there are the rest of them—Michael, who pops in and out regularly like the fun Uncle, and Wes, who really despises Michael being favored over him. I don't love him being around and he's forbidden from being alone with any of them, but he always weasels his way back in. There's also my sister, who I've now spoken probably thirty words to (progress is progress, even when it's slow), and the senator with his two little ones—my half siblings. I don't know how I'm supposed to regard them, knowing I'm the one who stole their mother from them. They're a little scared of me, probably because they can sense that I'm terrified of them, but they've made fast friends with most of the children here, and they adore Violet… their older sister who actually *acts* like one.

Of all the relationships I've worked at these last few months, it's the one with my father that I value most. It's the one I never knew I needed, but it fills a part of me that I didn't realize was hollow. The first time he got me alone, we just talked about Lauren… my mother. It's impossible not to feel the love that he still has for her, even twenty-two years later from the other side of the grave. It reminds me that love isn't finite—it doesn't expire if it's tended well enough.

He's also surprisingly good with children, and the only one I trust to leave alone with them. He's the one who's watching them today while Remy takes me 'out'. He's been cryptic about where we're headed.

The bruises and scars have finally faded, and the hemorrhaging on my eyes is gone. I feel good… really good. It's like all the pieces of who I was and who I've wanted to be are coming together, finally. I never would have guessed I could be a killer and a mother, but apparently, I have layers.

The ringing of my phone catches my attention. I pause at the name on the caller ID.

"Moose?" I ask, lifting it to the crook of my ear instead of putting it on speakerphone, all too aware of how Misty's keen eyes appraise my every move.

"Hey, princess." His voice is deep, but it sounds… sad. I've never known him to sound so hopeless, so empty. It immediately sets alarm bells off in the back of my head.

"What's wrong?" I ask, trying to stay calm. I turn to Misty, and in a lower voice ask her, "Can you find me my sweater? In case it's cold at the restaurant."

I see the suspicion in her eyes, but she scampers to my closet and rifles through it all the same.

“Moose.” I prompt. “Are you okay?”

His laugh is rye, and I try to imagine where he is, what he’s doing. “No.” There’s a half second where I think he may break into sobs, but all I hear is a sniffle. “But I will be. I’m actually calling to check on you.”

“Me?” I laugh as Misty brandishes the cardigan with a triumphant grin. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?” He asks. “Because you said you were fine the whole time I was hired to shadow you, and you were not fine, it turns out.”

I pause, wondering how much he knows. “I wasn’t.” I agree. “But I am now. Actually,” I see Misty standing behind me in our reflection, watching the skirt of her dress flow out in a circle. “I’m great.”

“Mmm.” He sounds a little unconvinced. “So, no more running off on your own to take down the bad guys, then?”

Not right now, at least. I won’t put my family in danger—not a single one of them. “How did you hear about that?”

His chuckle is dark, not entirely amused. “I hear a lot of shit in this profession, princess.”

I can imagine his head tipped over a glass of whiskey. “It’s good to hear from you.” I tell him honestly.

I didn’t even realize I missed him until I saw his name light on my phone. Despite my misguided attempts to throw myself at him, and as much as I gave him shit for stalking me, we became friends toward the end.

“You too, Monroe.” I can practically hear the smirk in his voice.

I can sense he’s about to hang up, but there’s something that needs to be said. And I guess I’m the one who needs to say it, so I rush out. “I miss you, you know?”

“My charming personality?” He chuckles. “Who could blame you?”

I roll my eyes, sighing. “Just… take care of yourself, okay?”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m taking care of a lot of things right now.”

I’m about to point out that that’s basically the opposite of what I just told him to do, but I swallow it instead. “Call me again, okay?”

“I don’t take orders from you anymore.” He scoffs. But then I hear the undercurrent of amusement, and just before the dial tone plays in my ear, he says, “But I will.”

As soon as I drop the phone onto my dresser, Misty is at my side. “Who’s Moose?”

“Just a friend.” I swipe a hair off her face, where it got stuck to the gloss on her lips. I’ll have to ask Remy if he’s been in contact with him, if he’s really okay, and if there’s anything we can do. But that conversation will have to wait for another day, because Misty grabs my hand and leads me to the staircase.

“She’s coming!” She announces, cupping her hands around her mouth so that her small voice carries down the steps. I can’t help but laugh as she rushes ahead of me and then ushers me down, as if I may have forgotten the way.

“What would I do without my hype girl?” I tease, tapping her on the nose as I pass. Her love language is touch, and she’s comfortable with showing and giving affection. I can’t say the same of all of them, though we’re working on it.

“You won’t have to find out.” She grins, pointing me toward the foyer, which is surprisingly empty. It’s also suspiciously quiet, until a giggle pierces the silence. I follow it to the living room and come to a dead stop as I take in the scene around me.

Paper snowflakes covered in glitter hang from fishing lines on the chandelier, and the Christmas tree in the corner twinkles with an array of colored lights. The air is perfumed with sugar cookies and cinnamon and pine.

And crowding the space is my family.

It's still weird to say. I haven’t gotten used to it just yet. But that’s exactly what they are—my brothers and sisters, my friends and father, my sons and daughters. My eyes pick Rhea’s out first, knowing that she can’t keep a secret to save her life. This has to be her doing.

“What is this?” I laugh, looking at the papier mâché ornaments adorning the pine tree.

“Now!” Rhea stage-whispers, and then a loud, collective “*Merry Christmas!*” fills the space, echoing off of the tall walls.

“Can we open presents?” Tyler asks, tipping his thumb behind him at the tree with all the excitement of a typical six year old on Christmas.

I don’t even know how to answer that, because I don’t know where it all came from… or *why*.

“In a minute.” Remy says, coming to my side and wrapping an arm around mine.

“I’m confused.” I admit, when he only stares at me like he’s expecting some sort of thank you. It’s beautiful, I’ll give him that, but I’m not sure why he decorated the house five months early, particularly given that every time I step out the door, I feel like I may melt.

“It’s Christmas.” He says, as if that’s self-explanatory.

“No.” I laugh. “It’s July.”

“Exactly.” Remy grins. “The first night I met you, you were celebrating Christmas in July. Rhea warned me that you took it seriously.”

“Not *this* seriously.” I laugh. “You’re going to confuse the kids.”

“They’ll be fine,” he promises. “They really enjoyed helping me set this up.”

“It’s… beautiful.” I smile, reassuring them that their effort hasn’t gone to waste. It really is beautiful, despite how confused I am.

“Yeah,” Remy says, though his eyes don’t leave me for a moment. When they do, he looks out at the scene he orchestrated. “It’s almost perfect.”

“*Almost*?” I tease, trying to imagine what could possibly be missing.

“Almost.” He nods.

And then, he sinks to one knee at my side and takes my hand in his. “We missed our first Christmas together because I was too stupid to admit that you’re all I need. And I couldn’t possibly wait ‘til this December to ask you to be my wife, because I think we’re going to be busy with our daughter then.”

I stare at him, my nose crinkling at the mention of ‘our daughter’. We haven’t figured out the baby’s gender, though blood test results could have given us a conclusive answer by now. It’s not that I don’t want a daughter, but he’s hellbent on the idea of it, and I think it may be a boy.

“We’ll be busy with our *baby*,” I correct him, for probably the thousandth time since I told him I was pregnant.

“Baby girl,” he nods. “So, I figured I’d get this out of the way now…”

He brandishes a ring— a beautiful solitaire I hadn’t even noticed him holding.

All at once, I realize what’s going on, and terror shoots to my toes.

“You don’t have to do this,” I whisper, leaning into him. “I’ll give the baby your last name regardless.”

“I don’t just want the baby to have my last name.” He laughs. “I want you to have it, too. I told you that.”

“Come on,” Wes chuckles. “This can’t really be a surprise, can it?”

“Nope.” Victor winks when I catch his eye. “He told me months ago that he was going to marry her whether I liked it or not.”

“Okay, maybe I should have waited to do this in private.” Remy laughs, shaking his head and focusing on me again. “I *want* you to marry me, Claire. I want *this*… it’s unusual, but it’s our family and I love it. But most of all, I love watching you every day growing our daughter, healing the hurt for not just me, but all of us. I want to celebrate Christmas in July for the rest of my life… with you.”

“Remy,” I breathe. I don’t know what to say. I don’t know if there are any words that fit a moment like this.

“I…” I can’t believe this is what he really wants. It seems so… *normal*, when we are anything but. We haven’t been normal from the start. Our match may have been preordained by some twisted bitch called fate, but that doesn’t mean that this is what was in our cards.

“Do it for me.” Rhea says, drawing my attention to where she’s standing, tucked under Dimitri’s arm. She’s holding Charlie, who’s got a fistful of her hair in his sticky fingers and a candy cane in his other hand. “I’ve always wanted you to be my sister. Make it official.”

“Marry us.” Michael teases. “We’re all a package deal now.”

“Oh, God,” I sigh. “If Michael is part of the deal, I can’t accept.”

There’s a moment where my words hang in the air, like everyone’s trying to decide whether there’s any truth to them.

“That’s rude, Claire!” Michael gasps, holding a hand to his chest as if I’ve just critically wounded him. “I thought we had something!”

“I can replace him,” Remy assures me, his mouth tilting up just the slightest. He leans into me, and I realize he’s still down on his knee. “I can replace any of them, but not you.”

It’s so absurd I want to laugh, but instead, I end up crying. It’s just a single tear… not the first I’ve cried, and I guarantee it won’t be the last.

“Yes.”

The word’s barely left my mouth when Remy slips the ring on my finger and the ceiling explodes in a blast of confetti and glitter like snow. The squeals of the kids eclipse almost everything, but I can hear the chorus of cheers from the adults too.

I don’t even get a chance to admire it, because he grabs my wrists, placing my hands on either side of my belly, and plants a kiss right in the center of them.

“Hear that, princess? I’m making an honest woman of your mom.”

THE END

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REMY

When my life flashed before my eyes as I lay bleeding on the back of the bus, it was only Claire that I saw, a beautiful highlight reel of her smile, her touch. But if I were to die now, it would be with this single image stuck in my head like static. I thought I knew beauty because I love a woman who is a masterpiece, but I've never seen her more beautiful than when she holds our daughter.

The light in her eyes is unlike anything I've seen from her—brighter than when she waltzed into my life wearing that sexy lingerie. I watch her come together right in front of me, bits of her that I never realized weren't there, and the minute she holds our daughter, they fill in.

Elena Lauren Boudreaux.

It's a big name for such a little girl, but it suits her. Those bright eyes of her mother's take us all in without a worry in the world, as if she has all the trust in us not to screw this up. And to be fair, we probably won't. There's too many of us to screw it up.

Claire sighs, soaking in the last minutes of quiet we may have the rest of our lives. Rhea handled things on the home front, but she'll storm in here in the next ten minutes and then all bets are off.

"You're astounding." I say, rubbing a knuckle across the smooth expanse of Elena's tiny cheek. Her lips are pulled into something like a pout, but otherwise, she's sleeping peacefully now.

"She's incredible." Claire agrees, pride oozing in every syllable.

When she senses my eyes on her, she glances up at me, recognizing I have something to say. “She is, but I was talking about you.”

Her laugh is dismissive, and she turns her attention back to our daughter, so I give her a minute before trying again. “*You* are astounding. *You* amaze me.”

I’ve seen a lot of shit but watching her birth a little human was probably the most intense thing of all. Being completely helpless was new to me, and it was a special sort of agony to not be able to take away her pain. We’ve both taken lives, watched a soul exit the world, and now we’ve both seen a new one come into it. There aren’t words other than the ones I’ve already given her.

And yet, as she glances back up at me, her eyes are filled with tears that are too heavy to be the tears of joy she first shed when the doctor placed Elena against her chest. They strike terror through me, and I glance her over, looking for the call button.

“Are you in pain? Do you need something?”

She shakes her head, but as fat tears roll down her cheeks, it’s obvious that something is wrong.

“Claire,” I say gently, setting my hand atop hers that’s splayed across the blanket bundling our baby. “Talk to me?”

“It’s stupid.” She sniffs, shaking her head like that will clear the tears. But her arms are full, so I wipe them away for her, slowly, stroking her cheek until she draws in a shaky breath. “I’m scared.”

I only blink at her. “That’s not stupid at all, Claire. That’s completely normal. We’re in charge of a human. I’m fucking terrified.”

She shakes her head again, and I wonder if maybe I should have pretended I’m not scared.

“It’s not just that,” she sighs, nipping at her lower lip as she tries to decide the words she needs. “It’s just… we both got fucked up by the adults in our life. Who’s to say we won’t do the same to her?”

“Claire…” I sigh, moving onto the bed and taking the space next to her so that I can tuck her head against my chest. “We won’t fuck this up because we’re different than our parents. Her story isn’t ours.”

“We don’t know that. We don’t know what the future holds.”

“We know that she has thirteen brothers and sisters so far who would do anything to protect her, a father that would kill for her, a mother that would

die for her, aunts and uncles who will dote on her every breath. This child will want for nothing, Claire, I promise you."

"I've just been thinking about my mother…" Claire ventures, her breath hitching with a sob she suppresses.

My stomach twists, because of course she has. It got lost on me in all the joy, but how can she not be aching for her own mother in a moment like this? "She grew up without parents, and at one point, she probably thought she was going to have it all with my father. And then…" She shakes her head and then burrows against my chest. "I mean, Violet and I grew up completely separate, and yet we both suffered. What if it's in our DNA? What if we passed that down to her?"

I stroke the top of her head, pressing my lips against her and breathing her in. "It doesn't matter where any of us came from. We've all broken the generational curses of our parentage, Claire. You, me, Rhea."

She nods, recognizing that as real as the fear is, we are not our parents. The circumstances are entirely different. And honestly, given how fantastic her father has been since he pulled himself out of the spiral, I don't doubt that if Lauren's story had ended differently, if Claire's had started differently, that he'd have been a fantastic father. And Lauren, from everything Victor and his sister have told us about her, would be the world's best mom.

"Even on the days where it's too much, our network is too big to fail. Dimitri, Kent, Elaine, Taissa. This baby in your arms? This beautiful, innocent little thing? She's the light that will keep us on the right path. No one can dim her light, baby. And no one will take her from us. I promise you that."

I expect her to argue that I can't promise that, and I've already been preparing my counterargument. Our house, as chaotic as it can get, has practically become Fort Knox as I've taken the process of babyproofing quite seriously. But Claire doesn't offer me any further discourse, simply holding Elena a little tighter.

There's a faint knock on the door, and then a moment later, my sister is creeping in. I expect to see Dimitri follow her in as she holds the door open, but instead, a blonde head pokes tentatively around the space.

"I don't have to stay, if you want me to go." Violet says, looking at me first, and then Claire.

"I told you," Rhea says, ushering her inside, "You're family."

“Of course you can stay.” Claire says, mustering a smile that’s only a little hesitant. I’m not sure yet how much I trust my sister-in-law… or my half-brother. He saved my life apparently, but I’ll never forget that he nearly took Claire from me. And his wife? Well, I’ve encouraged Claire to kill, but something about the way Violet did it sticks with me.

Claire killed to silence her demons, but I almost get the feeling her sister kills to feed hers.

Despite the invitation, Violet hesitates until Rhea drags her forward. When her eyes fall on Elena, my sister stills entirely, her mouth falling open as if she forgot the whole reason she was even here.

“Oh my God,” she whispers, closing the distance to where we are. I can see the tears shining in her eyes, the little quiver of her lips. “You did it.”

“Didn’t really have a choice.” Claire teases, her lips curling into a grin. “She had to come out one way or another.”

Spurred on by Rhea’s gushing, Violet creeps closer until she stands at the edge of the bed, her eyes wide with awe.

“She’s beautiful.” Violet breathes.

Claire tears her eyes from our daughter to smile at her sister, more genuinely this time. “She is.” She agrees. “Would you like to hold her?”

I bite my tongue, not bothering to remind Claire that she hasn’t even given the baby up to me yet. Something about the way the sisters look at each other tells me that this is something they both need, and I decided long ago that I will always put Claire’s needs above my own. Besides, when all is said and done, there is plenty of time to familiarize my daughter with the comfort of her father’s arms.

Violet opens her mouth and closes it, nervous. “I don’t… I’ve never held one before.”

“Perfect time to start.” Claire assures her.

“Go wash your hands,” Rhea instructs her. I’m impressed that she’s not jealous at the fact Claire offered her up to Violet first. “And then come sit down.”

Violet does as she’s instructed, a little bit of a skip in her step as she goes. I glance at Claire as her sister scrubs her hands like a surgeon and find that she’s closed her eyes for a moment, but her smile abates any of the anxiety I can feel over her exhaustion. When Violet sits, Claire opens her eyes and sits up, prepared to pass our daughter off. I take her instead, letting her relax a moment longer.

Elena wiggles just a little as I disturb her from her deep slumber, irritation obvious on her tiny little face.

I can't explain it but holding her in my arms even for a moment feels like the last piece of a puzzle sliding into place. It feels like the world and all of its problems folding for once, bowing aside to grant us this moment of perfect peace.

"Oh my God," Claire gasps softly as I hand my daughter off to Violet, as Rhea instructs her how to old her arms and support Elena's head. When I turn back to her, Claire's eyes are shining, but she isn't crying this time. "I forgot you haven't even held her yet. I've had her this whole time."

Rhea's head snaps up, but she only laughs when she sees me shake my head. I sit on the edge of the bed with her, close enough that I can snatch my daughter back at a moment's notice if I need to. But as I watch the light flicker on in Violet's eyes, I'm sure that I won't have to.

I don't know much about twins, except I'm glad we didn't have them. There was a moment where the doctor thought she heard a second heartbeat, which was enough to strike terror into both of us. Though, in hindsight, when you go from zero kids to fourteen in a single year, what's one more?

Watching Violet, and watching Claire watch Violet, I start to wonder what sort of effect something like this has on healing… If she had any doubts about how she looks like she was made for this, they must be erased when Claire literally watches herself with Elena.

It's perfect in every way I never could have imagined. It's unusual and chaotic, particularly when another knock on the door signifies Wes, Dimitri, and Michael's arrival. As they join us in the room and Rhea calls next on my daughter, as if any of the others were going to fight for the chance, I thread my fingers through Claire's and press a kiss to them, smiling as she sighs contentedly.

"See?" I tell her, gesturing to the visitors in the room. It's just a small sample of the people in our life—just a small part of our family. "She'll be the most protected girl in the whole world."

Claire laughs, and I'm not sure she even understands how seriously I mean it.

But of course, I do.

Claire's whole life, she's longed for a family. And while I'm sure it looked different in her mind, I think the reality probably played out better.

I know it did for me.

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